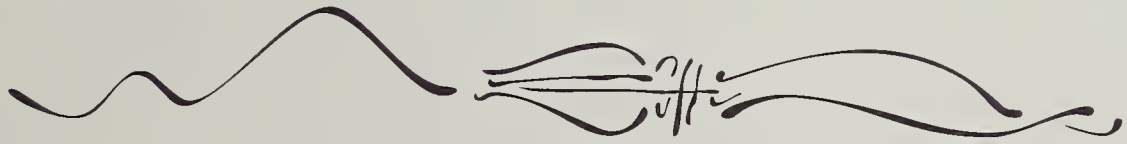
WRITINGAMERICA

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

A MILLENNIUM ARTS PROJECT

WRITINGAMERICA



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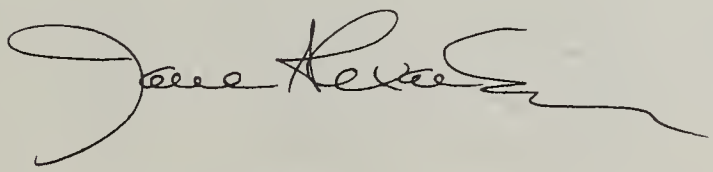
CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

WRITING AMERICA celebrates the achievements of National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship recipients, a program that has existed nearly as long as the agency itself. We asked 50 writers — one representing each state — to contribute a piece for this anthology, which seeks to evoke a sense of place, a portrait in miniature of American life as we approach the beginning of the new millennium. We take as our motto Whitman's lines: "I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear." These writers are part of that American song, that American story.

The writers — and the 2,200 other recipients of Creative Writing Fellowships — have made their mark on American letters and our culture this latter half of the 20th century. We are grateful for their contributions and are proud to have supported so many who tell the story — in poetry and prose — of the people and places of our Nation. They belong to us all, for we all participate in writing America through the stories of our lives.

WRITINGAMERICA is an official part of the National Endowment for the Arts' celebration of the Millennium through the arts.



– Jane Alexander

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Some of the writers in this anthology are peripatetic souls, moving from place to place in order to make a living or out of sheer wanderlust. Others have sprung up from the soil and have been rooted all their lives in their own hometowns. All of the writers, whether native sons or daughters or merely passing through, manage to evoke a sense of place through their words. This anthology is designed to showcase how their strong, clear voices describe American places. It is not a study in literary regionalism, but a montage of vignettes from each of the 50 states.

In putting together this book, our task was fairly simple: find a writer and a work or excerpt which manage to evoke each state. The difficulty arose from a surplus of good writers, and many of the outstanding voices the Arts Endowment has assisted over the course of a generation could not be included due to lack of space. From the wealth of voices, we selected these 50, aiming in general for a mix of poetry and prose, guided only by our gut feelings: does this say Pennsylvania? Does this evoke a sense of Wyoming? We chose one voice for each state, one of many possibilities.

We thank all 50 writers who contributed to WRITINGAMERICA as well as E.L. Doctorow who provided the Foreword. We are grateful to their publishers, not only for granting us re-print permission, but more importantly, for their ongoing support of serious literary work. Gigi Bradford and Cliff Becker, who are responsible for Literature grants, were instrumental in all aspects of making this anthology.

WRITINGAMERICA also serves, we hope, as inspiration to emerging writers. We hope this book provides a glimpse of the tremendous vitality, diversity, and energy of contemporary American literature and that the works themselves will arrest your attention and send you rushing off to the bookstore or library for more good words.

– Keith Donohue
Publications Director

OUR WRITERS AND POETS FIND THE MEANING, OR HIDDEN LIFE, IN THE OBSERVABLE LIFE, THEY ELICIT FROM THE VISIBLE WHAT IS INVISIBLE – WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE ARE GOING AND TO WHAT MORAL CONSEQUENCE.

THE WRITER'S PLACE

A poem, or a novel, is thought to be an expression of overriding individuality. In fact there is a ground song from which every writer takes voice, and our recognition of the genius of a writer –Mark Twain for instance – cannot exclude the people and the territory he comes from.

It is the wise society that provides what discreet encouragement it can for these singers who rise unbidden from the land. Inevitably, as Thoreau did with Walden, writers and poets endow places with meaning, locate them in the moral universe, give them a charged name.

This is essential business because uncharged with invisible meaning, the visible is nothing, mere clay.

Our writers and poets find the meaning, or hidden life, in the observable life, they elicit from the visible what is invisible – who we are and where we are going and to what moral consequence.

Nobody else can do this for us, not our movie stars, not our workaday politicians, nor our corporate CEOs nor media pundits. It is by nature a labor that must be independent of our material interests. It yields the dimensional reality that can only come of a multiplicity of witnesses. You will note that the TV commentator, with his vast audience, will allow himself only the narrowest range of thought, the most neutral diction. The writer with his small audience puts no limit on his thought and glories in his diction. The dared truth inseparable from its own precise articulation is what the writer and the poet will give you. It is a natural resource no less than our forests, rivers, farmlands and fisheries.

– *E.L. Doctorow*

Dennis Covington

Dennis Covington is the author of *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, which was a finalist for the 1995 National Book Award in Nonfiction. He is also the author of two novels, *Lasso the Moon* and *Lizard*, which won the Delacorte Press Prize for a First Young Adult Novel. Covington's articles and short stories have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, *The Georgia Review*, *Vogue*, *Redbook*, *Southern Exposure* and other periodicals. His play adaptation of *Lizard* premiered at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Theatre and was staged in Atlanta as part of the 1996 Olympic Arts Festival. He has received the Rea Non-Fiction Prize from the Boston Book Review and the Barrie Stavis Playwright Award from the National Theatre Conference. A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Covington directs the creative writing program at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, where he lives with his wife, novelist Vicki Covington, and their two daughters.

The NEA fellowship I received last year was clearly a blessing. It allowed me six months of concentrated writing time, a paradise of work. The circumstances, too, seemed significant. The award came at the very moment when I felt I had tapped into the voice of my people, the nearly forgotten culture of poor Southern whites. So I am grateful not only as an individual writer, but as a member of a generation cut off from its roots.

The award came at the very moment when I felt I had tapped into the voice of my people, the nearly forgotten culture of poor Southern whites.

from

Salvation on Sand Mountain

...Listen up. The peculiarity of Southern experience didn't end when the boll weevil ate up the cotton crop. We didn't cease to be a separate country when Burger King came to Meridian. We're as peculiar a people now as we ever were, and the fact that our culture is under assault has forced us to become even more peculiar than we were before. Snake handling, for instance, didn't originate back in the hills somewhere. It started when people came *down* from the hills to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture. All along their border with the modern world – in places like Newport, Tennessee, and Sand Mountain, Alabama – they recoiled. They threw up defenses. When their own resources failed, they called down the Holy Ghost. They put their hands through fire. They drank poison. They took up serpents.

They still do. The South hasn't disappeared. If anything, it's become more Southern in a last-ditch effort to save itself. And the South that survives will last longer than the one that preceded it. It'll be harder and more durable than what came before. Why? It's been through the fire. And I'm not just talking about the civil rights movement, although certainly that's a place we could start. I'm talking about the long, slow-burning fire, the original civil war and the industrialization that it spawned. I'm talking about the migration to the cities, the cholera epidemics, the floods. I'm talking about the wars that Southerners fought disproportionately in this century, the poverty they endured. I'm talking about our fall from Grace. I'm talking about the scorn and ridicule the nation has heaped on poor Southern whites, the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a history. I'm talking about the City. I don't mean Atlanta. I mean Birmingham.

In the country, they put their evil spirits in colored glass bottles hung on trees. But let me tell you what we do with evil spirits in the City. We start with coal that a bunch of our male ancestors died getting out of the ground. We heat it in ovens till it gives off poisonous gases and turns into coke, something harder and blacker than it was to begin with. Then we set that coke on fire. We use it to fuel our furnaces. These furnaces are immense things, bulb shaped and covered with rust. You wouldn't want one in your neighborhood. We fill the furnace with limestone and iron ore and any evil spirits we find lying around. The iron ore melts in the coke-driven fire. Impurities attach to the limestone and float to the top. What settles to the bottom is pure and incredibly hot. At a precise moment, we open a hole in the bottom of the furnace, and molten iron cascades out, a ribbon of red so bright you can hardly look at it. When I was a kid you could stand on the viaduct above the Sloss furnaces in downtown Birmingham and watch the river of molten iron racing along the ground, incandescent, inexorable, and so unpredictable that a spark from it flew up one night while my father's friend, Ross Keener, was leaning over the rail of the viaduct, flew up and put out his eye.

That's the kind of South I'm talking about.

– *Dennis Covington*

John Haines

John Haines has lived and worked in the Alaska wilderness much of his life. His many volumes of poetry include *News from the Glacier: Selected Poems 1960-1980,* and his many prose works include the memoir *The Stars, the Snow, the Fire* published by Graywolf Press. Mr. Haines's honors include an award from the Governor of Alaska for lifetime contribution to the arts, a Western States Arts Federation Lifetime Achievement Award, and a Lenore Marshall/The Nation poetry prize. He received a Literature Fellowship in 1968.

It has been many years since that fellowship. I was then still far in the sticks of Alaska, many miles from a city, and with no phone of my own, the nearest being some miles away.

This grant came close on the heels of a Guggenheim. The two grants, following closely on each other, gave me the first real money I had seen in many years, and made life a good deal easier in the circumstances I was then living in. Certainly it can be said that the funding from my fellowship allowed me to buy new books, and to have some needed leisure in which to read those books and work at whatever I had on hand at the time. I can say also that having been given a fellowship at the time generated a certain interest elsewhere and eventually sent me out on my first reading tour through the lower 48.

In other words, the two fellowships coming close together as they did, changed my life. I doubt that many people have had their lives changed as drastically as mine was at the time, but I don't doubt that many others have had some related experience and a period free from immediate money concerns.

[The fellowship]... generated a certain interest elsewhere and eventually sent me out on my first reading tour through the lower 48.

from

The Stars, The Snow, The Fire

There are shadows over the land. They come out of the ground, from the dust and the tumbled bones of the earth. Tree shadows that haunt the woodlands of childhood, holding fear in their branches. Stone shadows on the desert, cloud shadows on the sea and over the summer hills, bringing water. Shapes of shadows in pools and wells, vague forms in the sandlight.

Out of the past come these wind-figures, the flapping sails of primitive birds with terrible beaks and claws. Shadows of things that walked once and went away. Lickers of blood that fasten by night to the veins of standing cattle, to the foot of a sleeping man. In the Far North, the heavy, stalled bodies of mastodons chilled in a black ooze, and their fur-clad bones still come out of the ground. Triceratops was feeding in the marshlands by the verge of the coal-making forest.

Shadows in doorways, and under the eaves of ancient buildings, where the fallen creatures of stone grimace in sleep. Domestic, wind-tugged shadows cast by icy branches upon a bedroom window: they tap on the glass and wake us. They speak to the shadows within us, old ghosts that will not die. Like trapped, primordial birds, they break from an ice pool in the heart's well and fly into walls built long ago.

Stand still where you are – at the end of pavement, in a sunbreak of the forest, on the open, cloud-peopled terrace of the plains. Look deeply into the wind-furrows of the grass, into the leaf-stilled water of pools. Think back through the silence, of the life that was and is not here now, of the strong pastness of things – shadows of the end and the beginning.

It is autumn. Leaves are flying, a storm of them over the land. They are brown and yellow, parched and pale – Shelly's "pestilence-stricken multitudes." Out of an evening darkness they fly in our faces and scare us; like resigned spirits they whirl away and spill into hollows, to lie still, one on the other, waiting for snow.

– *John Haines*

Alberto Ríos

Alberto Ríos is the author of seven books and chapbooks of poetry, including *Teodoro Luna's Two Kisses*, and two collections of short stories, including *Pig Cookies*. He is the recipient of the Arizona Governor's Arts Award, the Walt Whitman Award, the Western States Book Award for Fiction, five Pushcart Prizes in both poetry and fiction, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. His work is included in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, as well as in over 100 national and international literary anthologies. His writing is regularly taught and translated, and has been adapted to both classical and modern music. Ríos is presently Regents Professor of English at Arizona State University.

The NEA helped make me, to loosely quote Neruda, a writer of public purpose. When I received my fellowship in 1979, I had just graduated from the University of Arizona with an MFA, and had no particular plan other than to write. If jobs are scarce now, they were even scarcer then. I had just married, and true to my childhood, moved from Tucson back to rural Arizona, seven miles south of Florence in an area known as Cactus Forest. There I was.

My NEA grant was for $10,000, and I bought a car. The car helped make me a writer and a teacher; it let me make my job be anywhere and everywhere. I found the classroom to be many places. The car was red, to be wild – I think to show what I felt in my heart about the whole circumstance – but it was a station wagon, too, which spoke to the work I knew it would mean. I was never sorry.

This working everywhere, with anyone: this has stayed with me. If the teaching was a scramble of a livelihood in those days, Poets-in-the-Schools, community forums, library talks, I nevertheless remember it only as a joy, and the foundation of what would soon become my university teaching. Writing mattered, and was a passion, even if in the fields of Eloy, or in the shadows of the Superstitions in Apache Junction, they had never spoken this secret aloud. The NEA helped me to find this out – about them and about myself.

The NEA helped make me, to loosely quote Neruda, a writer of public purpose.

True Story of the Pins

Pins are always plentiful
but one day they were not
and your Uncle Humberto
who collected all the butterflies
you see here on the walls,
was crazy looking for some
and he went to your cousin
Graciela the hard seamstress
who has pins it is rumored
even in hard times
but when she found out
why he wanted them
because the wind from the south
who was her friend
since the earliest days of her
childhood on the sea
told her, she firmly refused
your poor Uncle Humberto
whose picture is here
on the wall behind you,
did you feel his eyes,
and he went into the most terrible
of rages, too terrible
for a butterfly collector
we all said afterward
and he burst a vein
that grew like a great snake
on his small forehead
and he died on the dirt
floor of Graciela's house
who of course felt sick
and immediately went
and put pins, this is what has
made her hard, through
the bright wings of the butterflies
Humberto had prepared
since he was after all
her father and she
could afford no better
light of perpetuity.

– Alberto Rios

C.D. Wright

C.D. Wright was born and raised in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas. She has published eight collections of poetry, most recently *Tremble* and *Just Whistle*, a booklength poem. *String Light* won the 1992 Poetry Center Book Award given by San Francisco State University. She was awarded the Wittner Bynner Prize for Poetry from the American Academy and Institute for Arts and Letters in 1986, and in 1987, Fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Bunting Institute. She was a 1989 recipient of the Whiting Writers' Award and a 1990 recipient of the Rhode Island Governor's Award for the Arts. In 1994, she was named State Poet of Rhode Island, a five-year post. With poet Forrest Gander, she edits Lost Roads Publishers. Wright teaches at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.

Along with hundreds of other writers, and artists in all media, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts was the single most important award of my creative life. While I have been the fortunate recipient of other awards, some with substantially larger monetary attachments, none other were as critical to me as the NEA's in securing an opportunity to establish myself as an American artist. It specifically granted me time to finish my first booklength collection of poems, *Translations of the Gospel Back Into Tongues*, a book which has been reprinted many times in the 15 years since its first release, and time and encouragement to write the next book. Some of the presses with which I have been affiliated would not have been able to publish my books or anyone else's without assistance from the NEA. In fact the life of my genre is constantly threatened in a time and a place in which there is such a proliferation of competing claims on one's attention. I am not even sure there would be a recognizable American poetry if the National Endowment for the Arts had not asserted the value of having a vital culture.

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Kings' Daughters, Home for Unwed Mothers, 1948

Somewhere there figures a man. In uniform. He's not white. He
could be AWOL. Sitting on a mattress riddled with cigarette burns.
Night of a big game in the capitol. Big snow.
Beyond Pearl river past Petal and Leaf River and Macedonia;
it is a three-storied house. The only hill around. White.
The house and hill are white. Lighted upstairs, down.
She is up on her elbows, bangs wet and in her eyes. The head
of the unborn is visible at the opening. The head
crowns. Many helping hands are on her. She is told not to push.
But breathe. A firm voice.
With helping hands. They open the howl of her love. Out of her issues:

volumes of letters, morning glories on a string trellis, the job
at the Maybelline Factory, the job at the weapons plant, the hummingbird
hive, her hollyhocks, her grandmother's rigid back next to her
grandfather's bow, the briefest reflection of her mother's braid
falling below her wing blades, her atomizers and silverbacked
brush and comb, the steel balls under her father's knuckles, the
moon's punched-out face, his two-dollar neckties, the peacock
coming down the drive; there was the boy shuffling her way with
the melon on his shoulder, car dust all over his light clothes, the
Black Cat fireworks sign on the barn, her father's death from
moving the barn by himself, the family sitting in the darkened
room drinking ice tea after the funeral, tires blown out on the
macadam, the women beaten like eggs, the store with foundation
garments, and boys pelting the girls with peony buds, the meatgrinder
cringing in the corner of the store, the old icebox she couldn't
fix and couldn't sell so buried to keep out the kids, her grandmother's
pride, the prettiest lavalier, the pole houses; there was the boy
with the melon shifted to the other shoulder, coming her way,
grown taller and darker, wiping his sweat with his hand, his beautiful
Nubian head, older and set upon by the longingly necked girls
from the bottoms, his fishing hole, learning the questions of equality:
six for the white man and none for the rest; the sloping shadows
and blue hollows behind his shack, what the sunflowers saw, the
wide skirts she wore, the lizards they caught, the eagerness with
which they went through each other's folds of hair and skin, the
boy's outnumbered pride.

This couldn't go on, the difficulty of concealment, putting make-up
over a passion mark. 1947, summer of whiskey and victory and
fear. It was long, then over. The letters burned. She heaves. Bleeds.
In the words of the grandmother: Do not eat oranges under the moon,
eat fruit that is green and cold. What was meant by that, really.
The infant's head is huge. She tears. He's white. He'll make it
just fine. The firm voice. The hands that helped.
What would become of this boychild. The uniformed man and she
will never know. That they will outlive him. They will never know.
That he will do things they never dreamed.

– C.D. Wright

Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston is the author of *The Woman Warrior – Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, China Men, Tripmaster Monkey – His Fake Book,* and *Hawai'i One Summer.* She lives in California.

Given an NEA grant, I feel thanked by my country. In a more perfect world, I would have received it when I needed it. I wish there were a way for the unknown writer to get a boost. To me, the NEA grant is reward for having already arrived at one's goal. For that, in turn, I thank you.

Given an NEA grant, I feel thanked by my country.

from

Tripmaster Monkey

"Let's walk," he said, stubbing out his cigarette. "Let's amble the blue North Beach streets as the evening sun goes down into the far grey water."

Though they walked through the land of the wasted, no Malte sights popped out to hurt him, she dispelling them. By day, the neon was not coursing through its glass veins. The dancing girl in spangles and feathers had flown out of her cage, which hung empty over the street. Nobody barked and hustled at the doorways to acts and shows. The day-folks, wheeling babies, wheeling grandpa, holding children by the hand, were shopping for dinner at the grocery stores and the bakery, dropping by the shoe repair. Oh, the smell of the focaccia oven — O Home. A florist with white moustachios jaywalked through traffic with armsful of leonine football chrysanthemums. Behind glass, at the all-day-all-night place on the pie-wedge corner, poets, one to a table, were eating breakfast. The Co-Existence Bagel Shop was gone. The old guys, *Seventh Seal* knights, had played chess with Death and lost. The Bagel Shop, Miss Smith's Tea Room, Blabbermouth Night at The Place — all of a gone time. Out from the open door of La Bodega, a folksy guitar sweetened the air. The guitar was being passed around, and each played the tune he knew. You should have been there the night Segovia dropped by and played flamenco. Wittman musefully sang as if to himself a Mose Allison riff.

A young ma-a-an
ain't nothin' in this world today.
Because the ol' men's
got all the money.

The air of the City is so filled with poems, you have to fight becoming imbued with the general romanza. Nanci's long black hair and long black skirt skirled with the afternoon breezes. The leather of her shoulder bag strapped a breast. Her arms and outstretched legs were also long and black; she wore a leotard and tights like an old-fashioned Beat chick but, honestly, a dancer, dance togs for a good reason. Here he was: Wittman Ah Sing profiling down the street with a beautiful almost-girlfriend, clipping along, alongside, keeping up with him, the two of them making the scene on the Beach, like cruising in the gone Kerouac time of yore.

He ducked into the bookstore. She followed right on in. She stood beside him, browsing the rack of quarterlies, quite a few brave Volume 1 Number Ones. There were homemade books too, mimeo jobs, stencils, and small-press poetry that fit neat in the hand. On the top rack — right inside the door at eye level for all to see coming in or going out — was: an artistic avant-garde far-out new magazine that had published — in print — a scene from his play-in-progress — the lead-piece — with his byline — right inside the front cover. He could reach over and hand it to her, but it would be more perfect if she happened to pick it out herself, come upon his premiere on her own, and be impressed. (F. Scott Fitzgerald, trying to impress Sheila Graham, had driven to every bookstore in L.A., but could not find a copy of any of his books.)

Wittman went downstairs to the cool basement, where among the bookshelves were chairs and tables with ashtrays. He had first come to this place when he was a high-school kid on one of his escapes from Sacramento, Second City to Big City. No *No Free Reading* sign. No *No Smoking*. You didn't have to buy a book; you could read for nothing. You had a hangout where you didn't have to spend money. Quiet. All the radios in Chinatown blaring out the ball game, but here, we don't care about the World Series. He hadn't known the City Lights Pocket Book Shop was famous until the *Howl* trial, which he had cut school to attend. "Shig" Shigeyoshi Murao was the one charged with selling an obscene book. The muster of famous poets had blown Wittman away — everybody friends with everybody else, a gang of poets. He, poor monkey, was yet looking for others of his kind.

– *Maxine Hong Kingston*

Linda Hogan

Linda Hogan is a Chickasaw poet, novelist, and essayist. Her most recent books are *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Natural World* and a novel, *Solar Storms*, which received the Colorado Book Award. Hogan's earlier novel, *Mean Spirit*, was one of three finalists for the Pulitzer Prize in 1991. *Seeing Through the Sun*, received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and *The Book of Medicines* received the Colorado Book Award and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, a Minnesota Arts Board Grant, a Colorado Writers Fellowship, a Lannan Fellowship, and The Five Civilized Tribes Museum Playwriting Award. She is co-editor of *Intimate Nature: The Bond Between Women and Animals* and "Everything Has a Spirit," a documentary film on PBS. Her novel *Power* will be published by Norton in 1998.

The year I received an NEA fellowship was just before the literature of Native American writers was surfacing and becoming visible to American publishing. The conscience of this country was not yet examined. For the most part, we Indian people were portrayed as part of the American narrative in words not our own, in stories told about us but not by us.

The year I received a fellowship I was able to have the time and silence to write, to add a voice to the story of our land, an indigenous voice grown from, shaped by, this land. It allowed for the expression of love and relationship that rose from within this beautiful landscape and the people it has sustained, the people who have sustained it.

Among researchers who study whale language, it is known that the songs of whales are constantly changing. Some parts of the song drop away while new songs appear. Like whales, our stories, too, are constantly growing and evolving. Through writing, through time, our world is made larger, reenvisioned with sharper, more clear eyes. The stories I have been allowed to participate in, through the gift of this time of support, have allowed for another view of history and the American story, a view still growing.

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Drum

Inside the dark human waters
of our mothers,
inside the blue drum of skin
that beat the slow song of our tribes
we knew the drifts of continents
and moving tides.

We are the people who left water
to enter a dry world.
We have survived soldiers and drought,
survived hunger
and living
inside the unmapped terrain
of loneliness.
That is why we have thirst.
It is why
when we love
we remember our lives in water,
that other lives fall through us
like fish swimming in an endless sea,
that we are walking another way
than time,
to new life, backward
to deliver ourselves to rain and river,
this water
that will become other water
this blood that will become other blood
and is the oldest place
the deepest world
the skin of water
that knows the drum before the hand meets it.

– *Linda Hogan*

J. D. McClatchy

J. D. McClatchy is the author of four collections of poems: *Scenes From Another Life*, *Stars Principal*, *The Rest of the Way*, and *Ten Commandments*. His literary essays are collected in *White Paper*, which was given the Melville Cane Award by the Poetry Society of America, and in *Twenty Questions*. He has also edited *The Vintage Book of Contemporary World Poetry*, *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, *Poets on Painters*, *Recitative: Prose by James Merrill*, and *Anne Sexton: The Poet and Her Critics*. His new translation of Horace's *The Art of Poetry* will be published later this year by Sea Cliff Press. McClatchy has taught at Princeton, Yale, Columbia, UCLA, Rutgers, and other universities, and since 1991, he has served as editor of *The Yale Review*. He has written four libretti, most recently for Tobias Picker's *Emmeline*, commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera in 1996 and broadcast nationally on PBS. In 1996, he was named a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 1991, he was given an Award in Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts & Letters, and the citation read: "It may be that no more eloquent poet will emerge in his American generation."

"Bees" is a fable about two aspects of the creative imagination: its syrups and its stitching, its restlessness and its concentration. Both are necessary to make – or rather, do the work of art. Through its fellowship program, the National Endowment for the Arts has given literary artists the time to think and the encouragement to write. I know because a while ago, when I needed one, I had the good fortune to receive one of these fellowships, and it made a crucial difference.

Every poem takes a lifetime to write. Over the years, the NEA's enlightened initiatives have themselves given life to the nation's imagination. If the spirit of this country is not its foremost national interest, what is? And when government abdicates its responsibility to nourish that spirit, who is being served?

Over the years, the NEA's enlightened initiatives have themselves given life to the nation's imagination.

Bees

First to bloom at last
    this late spring
the crabapple's a wain
    of white the ox
sun is hauling homeward.

Humble brawl on top
    goaded by syrups,
the rut of work so far
    from the wing-lit
hive of their making.

A bent toward folly argues
    for intelligence.
They'll break with the past
    as with an enemy.
The flowers cry to them.

* * *

Left behind, in clover's
    common sense,
a solitary honeybee
    plies her trade.
Circumspect, all twelve

thousand eyes are trained
    on her needlework:
genetic cross-stitch
    and pollen purl.
Her pattern is the field's.

– *J.D. McClatchy*

W. D. Snodgrass

W.D. Snodgrass is a poet, translator and literary critic who has published over a dozen books, including *After Experience: Poems and Translations, The Fuhrer Bunker, To Shape a Song, The Death of Cock Robin, Autumn Variations,* and *Each in His Season*. He taught for many years at the University of Delaware and received the Pulitzer Prize for *Heart's Needle.*

The grant I received from the NEA in 1966 permitted me to take a Sabbatical Leave from my teaching post at Wayne State University.

Of the three books I worked on, the most crucial for me was a collection of new poems, *After Experience*. I had been warned by older poets that because of the good reception my first book had met, I should expect many bad reviews for this book. So it was very important for me that, if the book were attacked, that would not shake my confidence that I had done the best I could.

I also did a great deal of work on translating the poems of the great German comic poet, Christian Morgenstern. Lore Segal and I translated roughly 150 of his poems and then chose 124 for our volume, *Gallows Songs*, which used engravings by Paul Klee. I once overheard Randall Jarrell remark that it was the best book of poetry translations he'd ever read. To call that encouraging would be a vast understatement.

Finally, I was able to do much of the work on a cycle of poems about the death of my sister. These poems appeared in 1970 from the Perishable Press in a pseudonymous volume, *Remains*, by S.S. Gardons. After the death of my parents, this book was republished (with some revisions) by BOA Editions in 1985.

At that critical juncture – the period after a successful first book and a time of great turmoil in my personal affairs – such support was of greatest value in assuring me that my work was recognized and held in high regard.

At that critical juncture… such support was of greatest value.

A Seashell

Say that inside this shell, some live
Thing hungered, trembled to survive,
Mated, died. Lift this to your ear
The way the young, on tape decks, hear
What to become, or on the phone,
The old evoke a dial tone
To what they had. Your blood will pound
Down those bare chambers, then resound
Your own ear's caverns as a ground

Bass swells, the depths of some salt tide
Still tuned to our salt blood. Outside,
The woods, nights, still ring back each word.
Our young owl, though, that always heard
My hoot, then veered down through the dark,
Our fox that barked back when we'd bark,
Won't answer, though. Small loss, now, when
Friends ask that I not call again.
Our pulse homed in on each other's, then.

Last night, I heard your voice — caught on
Streets we once taped in Isfahan;
Then, in a mosque near Joppa, blent
With hushed devotions and lament.
Now, put the shell back down, at rest
Near this brain coral, this wren's nest,
These photographs that will stand here
On their shelf in the silent, dear,
Locked, empty house another year.

– *W.D. Snodgrass*

Joy Williams

Joy Williams is perhaps best known for her gemlike short stories, particularly the collection *Taking Care*. She is the author of *State of Grace*, *The Changling*, *Breaking and Entering*, and *Escapes*, and a history and guide called *The Florida Keyes*. She has taught around the country at several universities, and in 1974, she received a Guggenheim fellowship. She lives in the Florida Keys.

It's a remarkable thing to be rewarded by one's own government for being an artist, for pursuing a unique vision. The recognition and money was enormously helpful to me at the time, and since then I've been a judge for the NEA and know that the criteria is excellence, always only excellence and promise. It's a great fellowship to receive, a sustaining and emboldening award.

It's a remarkable thing to be rewarded by one's own government for being an artist, for pursuing a unique vision.

from

The Yard Boy

The yard boy was a spiritual materialist. He lived in the Now. He was free from the karmic chain. Being enlightened wasn't easy. It was very hard work. It was manual labor actually.

The enlightened being is free. He feels the sorrows and sadness of those around him but does not necessarily feel his own. The yard boy felt that he had been enlightened for about two months, at the most.

The yard boy had two possessions. One was a pickup truck. The other was a plover he had stuffed and mounted when he thought he wanted to be an ornithologist, in the days before he had become a spiritual materialist. The bird was in the room he rented. The only other thing in the room was a bed. The landlady provided sheets and towels. Sometimes when he came back from work hot and sweaty with little bits of leaves and stuff caught in his hair, the landlady would give him a piece of key lime pie on a blue plate.

The yard boy was content. He had hard muscular arms and a tanned back. He had compassion. He had a girl friend. When he thought about it, he supposed that having a girl friend was a copout to the security which he had eschewed. This was a preconception however and a preconception was the worst form of all the forms of security. The yard boy believed he was in balance on this point. He tried to see things the way they were from the midst of nowhere, and he felt he had worked out this difficulty about the girl friend satisfactorily. The important thing was to be able to see through the veils of preconception.

The yard boy was a handsome fellow. He seldom spoke. He was appealing. Once he had run over an old lady and had broken her leg, but no one had gotten mad at him about it. Now that he was a yard boy his hands smelled of 6-6-6. His jeans smelled of tangelos. He was honest and truthful, a straightforward person who did not distinguish between this and that. For the girl friend he always had a terrific silky business which was always at the ready.

The yard boy worked for several very wealthy people. In the morning of every day he got into his pickup and drove over the causeways to the Keys where he mowed and clipped and cut and hauled. He talked to the plants. He always told them what he was going to do before he did it so that they would have a chance to prepare themselves. Plants have lived in the Now for a long time but they still have to have some things explained to them.

At the Wilsons' house the yard boy clips a sucker from an orange tree. It is May. Even so, the orange tree doesn't like it much. Mrs. Wilson comes out and watches the yard boy while he works. She has her son with her. He is about three. He doesn't talk yet. His name is Tao. Mrs. Wilson is wealthy and can afford to be wacky. What was she supposed to do after all, she asked the yard boy once, call her kid George? Fred? For Godssakes.

Her obstetrician had told her at the time that he had never seen a more perfectly shaped head.

The Wilsons' surroundings are splendid. Mrs. Wilson has splendid clothes, a splendid figure. She has a wonderful Cuban cook. The house is worth three quarters of a million dollars. The plantings are worth a hundred thousand dollars. Everything has a price. It is fantastic. A precise worth has been ascribed to everything. Every worm and aphid can be counted upon. It costs a certain amount of money to eradicate them. The sod is laid down fresh every year. For weeks after the lawn is installed, the seams are visible and then the squares of grass gather together and it becomes, everywhere, in sun or shade, a smooth, witty and improbable green like the color of a parrot.

Mrs. Wilson follows the yard boy around as he tends to the hibiscus, the bougainvillea, the poinciana, the Cuban Royal, the natal plum. They stand beneath the mango, looking up.

"Isn't it pagan," Mrs. Wilson says.

– Joy Williams

Alice Walker

Alice Walker was born in Georgia and has worked all over the country as a social worker and teacher. She has written novels, children's fiction, poetry, essays, novellas and short stories and earned numerous awards and fellowships for her work. Her short story collections include *In Love and Trouble* and *You Can't Keep A Good Woman Down*, and among her poetry titles are *Goodnight, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* and *Horses Make a Landscape Beautiful*. Her novels include the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*. Her most recent book is *Anything We Love Can Be Saved: A Writer's Activism*.

The small NEA grant encouraged me to believe someone other than myself valued what I was doing. This was large.

The small NEA grant encouraged me to believe someone other than myself valued what I was doing.

The Flowers

It seemed to Myop as she skipped lightly from hen house to pigpen to smokehouse that the days had never been as beautiful as these. The air held a keenness that made her nose twitch. The harvesting of the corn and cotton, peanuts and squash, made each day a golden surprise that caused excited little tremors to run up her jaws.

Myop carried a short, knobby stick. She struck out at random at chickens she liked, and worked out the beat of a song on the fence around the pigpen. She felt light and good in the warm sun. She was ten, and nothing existed for her but her song, the stick clutched in her dark brown hand, and the tat-de-ta-ta-ta of accompaniment.

Turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin, Myop walked along the fence till it ran into the stream made by the spring. Around the spring, where the family got drinking water, silver ferns and wildflowers grew. Along the shallow banks pigs rooted. Myop watched the tiny white bubbles disrupt the thin black scale of soil and the water that silently rose and slid away down the stream.

She had explored the woods behind the house many times. Often, in late autumn, her mother took her to gather nuts among the fallen leaves. Today she made her own path, bouncing this way and that way, vaguely keeping an eye out for snakes. She found, in addition to various common but pretty ferns and leaves, an armful of strange blue flowers with velvety ridges and a sweetsuds bush full of the brown, fragrant buds.

By twelve o'clock, her arms laden with sprigs of her findings, she was a mile or more from home. She had often been as far before, but the strangeness of the land made it not as pleasant as her usual haunts. It seemed gloomy in the little cove in which she found herself. The air was damp, the silence close and deep.

Myop began to circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning. It was then she stepped smack into his eyes. Her heel became lodged in the broken ridge between brow and nose, and she reached down quickly, unafraid, to free herself. It was only when she saw his naked grin that she gave a little yelp of surprise.

He had been a tall man. From feet to neck covered a long space. His head lay beside him. When she pushed back the leaves and layers of earth and debris, Myop saw that he'd had large white teeth, all of them cracked or broken, long fingers, and very big bones. All his clothes had rotted away except some threads of blue denim from his overalls. The buckles of the overalls had turned green.

Myop gazed around the spot with interest. Very near where she'd stepped into the head was a wild pink rose. As she picked it to add to her bundle she noticed a raised mound, a ring, around the rose's root. It was the notted remains of a noose, a bit of shredding plowline, now blending benignly into the soil. Around an overhanging limb of a great spreading oak clung another piece. Frayed, rotted, bleached, and frazzled — barely there — but spinning relentlessly in the breeze. Myop laid down her flowers.

And the summer was over.

– Alice Walker

Cathy Song

Cathy Song was born in Honolulu, Hawai'i. Her first book of poems, *Picture Bride*, was selected by Richard Hugo as winner of the 1982 Yale Series of Younger Poets Award and was also nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her second book, *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light*, was published in 1988 by W.W. Norton. In 1994, the University of Pittsburgh Press brought out *School Figures* in the Pitt Poetry Series. She has received a number of awards including the Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America and the Hawai'i Award for Literature. Her poetry has been widely published in such anthologies as *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

A Literature fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts means a great deal to me. It means I live in a country that refuses to be shut down, numbed, silenced and partylined by the ranting and raving of the truly timid – those who in their fear of life and living seek to make it their mission to obstruct the voices of its artists. It means I live in a country that chooses to hear the vital singing – the pulsations, the life blood, the pathways that connect us profoundly to each other, profoundly to the intelligent compassionate cosmos.

[This fellowship] means a great deal to me. It means I live in a country that refuses to be shut down, numbed, silenced…

Picture Bride

She was a year younger
than I,
twenty-three when she left Korea.
Did she simply close
the door of her father's house
and walk away. And
was it a long way
through the tailor shops of Pusan
to the wharf where the boat
waited to take her to an island
whose name she had
only recently learned,
on whose shore
a man waited,
turning her photograph
to the light where lanterns
in the camp outside
Waialua Sugar Mill were lit
and the inside of his room
grew luminous
from the wings of moths
migrating out of the cane stalks?
What things did my grandmother
take with her? And when
she arrived to look
into the face of the stranger
who was her husband,
thirteen years older than she,
did she politely untie
the silk bow of her jacket,
her tent-shaped dress
filling with the dry wind
that blew from the surrounding fields
where the men were burning the cane?

– *Cathy Song*

Robert Wrigley

Robert Wrigley was born in East St. Louis, Illinois, but has lived the last 20 years and more in Idaho, where he has come to a deep and abiding love of the Western wilderness. He has published four books of poetry, the most recent being *In The Bank Of Beautiful Sins*, which won the 1997 San Francisco Poetry Center Book Award. In addition to his two NEA Fellowships, he has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Idaho Commission on the Arts. For two years in the mid-eighties, he served as Idaho's state writer-in-residence. He lives with his family at Lenore, in the canyon of the Clearwater River.

As I look down the list of contributors to this anthology, I am both humbled and honored. It's a little like a literary who's who, except that many of the folks here were not who they are now, back when they received their NEA Fellowships. And that's the point. NEA Literature Fellowships have always been an investment in literary potential, in the kind of writers who will probably never make the bestseller list, but who will in the long run shape the literary history of the nation. Even with my NEA Fellowship, I couldn't afford to quit my job and write full-time, but it allowed me to teach half-time and to devote just enough of myself to my art to take the necessary stride to another level, and maybe that stride is why I am lucky enough to find myself in this extraordinary company today. And as the primary definition of "fellowship" indicates, it is foremost a feeling of community that comes with such an award. Not merely a community of writers either, but a community of Americans, who have helped us to get the work down on paper, and to whom we mean to give back the best we can do.

NEA Literature Fellowships have always been an investment in literary potential, in the kind of writers who will probably never make the bestseller list, but who will in the long run shape the literary history of the nation.

Field Burning: A Full Moon

Cold air comes down like a dome
above the burning fields.
For days the rabbits and mice have fled,
the sky all smoke and rapturous wings.
It is something to see, all right,
cars from town parked along the barrows,
bird-watchers clutching binoculars,
and parents on their knees
tracing an eagle's plummet toward a vole.

Now the moon, a salmon medallion,
some red-faced farm boy leering past a banjo.
Who doesn't love the black birds
coming priestly through the just-cooled ash
and euthanized stubble? They will eat
even cooked meat, they will primp
and call, little tramps of darkness
keeping funereal hours, cassocked wings
behind their backs, furrow to furrow, collecting souls.

– *Robert Wrigley*

Li-Young Lee

Li-Young Lee was born in 1957 in Jakarta, Indonesia of Chinese parents. In 1959 after spending a year as a political prisoner, Lee's father fled the country with his family, and settled in America in 1964. Lee is the author of two volumes of poetry: *The City in Which I Love You*, the 1990 Lamont Poetry Selection of the Academy of American Poets, and *Rose*. Mr. Lee is the recipient of grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the Illinois Council on the Arts.

I can't imagine my life without the grants. They allowed me the kind of uninterrupted time to follow every instinct and intuition to their inevitable conclusions. The fellowships allowed me to practice a kind of consistency and constancy in regards to my art.

The fellowships allowed me to practice a kind of consistency and constancy in regards to my art.

This Hour and What Is Dead

Tonight my brother, in heavy boots, is walking
through bare rooms over my head,
opening and closing doors.
What could he be looking for in an empty house?
What could he possibly need there in heaven?
Does he remember his earth, his birthplace set to torches?
His love for me feels like spilled water
running back to its vessel.

At this hour, what is dead is restless
and what is living is burning.

Someone tell him he should sleep now.

My father keeps a light on by our bed
and readies for our journey.
He mends ten holes at the knees
of five pairs of boys' pants.
His love for me is like his sewing:
too much thread and various colors,
the stitching uneven. But the needle pierces
clean through with each stroke of his hand.

At this hour, what is dead is worried
and what is living is fugitive.

Someone tell him he should sleep now.

God, that old furnace, keeps talking
with his mouth of teeth,
a beard stained at feasts, and his breath
of gasoline, airplane, human ash.
His love for me feels like fire,
feels like doves, feels like river water.

At this hour, what is dead is helpless, kind
and helpless. While the Lord lives.

Someone tell the Lord to leave me alone.
I've had enough of his love
that feels like burning and flight and running away.

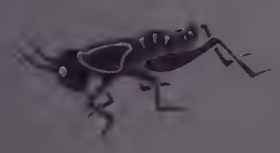
– *Li-Young Lee*

Scott Russell Sanders

Scott Russell Sanders is the author of 15 books, including novels, collections of stories and essays, and personal narratives. His work has been supported by fellowships from the Indiana Arts Commission. the Lilly Endowment, and the Danforth and Guggenheim Foundations. Among his honors are the Associated Writing Programs Award in Creative Nonfiction for *The Paradise of Bombs*, the Ohioana Book Award for *Staying Put*, and the Great Lakes Book Award for *Writing From The Center*. In 1995 he received the Lannan Literary Award for his collected work in nonfiction. Sanders has also won the highest teaching award at Indiana University, where he is Distinguished Professor of English.

When I received the fellowship, I had published only a single book, after ten years of hard work, and I was beginning to wonder if my stubborn commitment to writing was foolhardy. The letter from NEA not only assured me of a year's freedom to concentrate on my art, it reassured me that I wasn't a fool for loving language or for imagining that I might learn to use it well. While my fellow writers, acting as judges, picked my manuscript out of the pile, my fellow citizens gave me the money through their taxes, and this gift has deepened my desire to make books that are useful to my community, as well as beautiful.

...this gift has deepened my desire to make books that are useful to my community, as well as beautiful.



from

Landscape and Imagination

To be intimate with a landscape is to know its moods and contours as you would know a lover's. The shape of breasts and hills, the sound of a laugh or the song of bullfrogs, the smell of hair and honeysuckle — such knowledge becomes part of who you are. As in marriage, however, what is utterly familiar may lose its charm, may in fact become invisible, until you are deprived of it. Absent yourself a while from lover or landscape, and upon returning you will recognize with fresh acuity what you had known but forgotten.

I experienced such a freshening of awareness not long ago, when I returned with my family to Indiana after a year's sojourn in Boston. We drove into the state one afternoon toward the end of July, the air rushing in our car windows like the breath from a furnace, a haze of muggy heat blurring the flat horizon. Thunderheads were massing in the west, grave clouds that cast their dark temper onto the whole countryside. A rising wind made silver maples show the pale undersides of their leaves and set cattails stirring in stock ponds and bent the trajectories of birds. After a year in the bunched-up terrain of New England, I was amazed by the extent of sky, the openness of the land, the vigor of the head-high corn, the loneliness of the farmsteads, the authority of those clouds.

We pulled over and shut off the engine for a change of drivers. I could smell hot tar bubbling in the joints of the road, creosote in telephone poles, windblown dust from cultivated fields, the mustiness of new-mown hay, the green pungency of Queen Anne's lace and chicory and black-eyed Susans. In the stillness I could hear the distant grumble of thunder like a clearing of throats, and the nearby ratcheting of crickets and cicadas. Only when I caught those smells, heard those sounds, did I realize how much I had missed them in the East, just as I had missed the sight of a level horizon broken by power lines, grain elevators, water towers, silos, and the shade trees around farmhouses. During our absence, the Midwest had suffered through a plague of cicadas. When we had called Indiana from Boston, the ruckus of insects over the telephone had all but drowned out the voices of our friends. Now, as I walked around to the passenger side of the car, cast-off cicada shells crunched under my feet. That sensation also was a re-discovery.

We angled south from Indianapolis toward home in Bloomington, coasting from the glacial plain into wooded hills, a landscape not so markedly different from that of New England. And yet even here my heightened senses picked up a flurry of details that characterize this place: limestone roadcuts, the white blaze of sycamores in creekbeds, pastures growing up in cedar and sumac, bottomlands planted in soybeans, sway-backed barns tatooed with ads for chewing tobacco, sinuous gravel driveways leading to basketball hoops, trailers and shacks interspersed with tidy ranch houses, the occasional white clapboard mansion encrusted with fretwork, the blither of billboards (outlawed in most of New England), the low-slung evangelical churches, and over it all that sovereign sky. The light was the silken yellow peculiar to a region of tornadoes. The fields recently harrowed were the color of buckskin. Unchecked by ocean or mountains, the storm that came roaring through the hills was another local species, its thunder jolting us inside the car with sudden changes in air pressure. In the twilight before the deluge, fireflies along the roadside blinked their semaphore of desire. Even in the dark that overtook us before we reached our front door, there was an unmistakable familiarity in the roasted-earth smell of rain and in the leap of lightning, which lit up the swirling treetops and shaggy hills.

– *Scott Russell Sanders*

Jane Smiley

Jane Smiley is the author of *At Paradise Gate*, *Duplicate Keys*, *The Age of Grief*, *The Greenlanders*, *Ordinary Love and Good Will*, and *Moo*. Her novel, *A Thousand Acres*, received the Pulitzer Prize. She teaches in the Department of English at Iowa State University.

I received my first NEA fellowship in 1977. I got $7500, which was a tremendous amount at the time, and enabled me to write my first novel, *Barn Blind*. The pat on the back was worth as much as the money. For the first time, I felt rewarded rather than just allowed to proceed. I received my second fellowship in 1987, after I had established myself as a promising young writer, but while I was still casting about for the real subjects of my mature work. The money enabled me to write fiction rather than look for journalism or nonfiction topics that might be quick to sell. In both instances, money from the NEA smoothed my passage through difficult transitional moments in my career, and helped me move forward. All in all, I received $27,500. Once my career was established, the federal taxes and social security taxes I paid on my writing repaid by many times what I received. All federal programs should have such a rate of return!

The money enabled me to write fiction rather than look for journalism or nonfiction topics that might be quick to sell.

from

A Thousand Acres

There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn't the primeval mold I read about at school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence. Tile "drew" the water, warmed the soil, and made it easy to work, enabled him to get into the fields with his machinery a mere twenty-four hours after the heaviest storm. Most magically, tile produced prosperity — more bushels per acre of a better crop, year after year, wet or dry. I knew what the tile looked like (when I was very young, five- or twelve-inch cylinders of real tile always lay here and there around the farm, for repairs or extensions of tile lines; as I got older, "tile" became long snakes of plastic tubing), but for years, I imagined a floor beneath the topsoil, checkered aqua and yellow like the floor in the girls' bathroom in the elementary school, a hard shiny floor you could not sink beneath, better than a trust fund, more reliable than crop insurance, a farmer's best patrimony. It took John and Sam and, at the end, my father, a generation, twenty-five years, to lay the tile lines and dig the drainage wells and cisterns. I in my Sunday dress and hat, driving in the Buick to church, was the beneficiary of this grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on. However much these acres looked like a gift from nature, or of God, they were not. We went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks.

It was pretty clear that John Cook had gained, through dint of sweat equity, a share in the Davis farm, and when Edith turned sixteen, John, thirty-three by then, married her. They continued to live in the bungalow, and Sam and Arabella ordered a house from Sears, this one larger and more ostentatious than the bungalow, "The Chelsea." They took delivery on the Chelsea (four bedrooms, living room, dining room, *and* reception hall, with indoor bathroom, and sliding doors between the living room and dining room, $1129) at the freight delivery point in Cabot. The kit included every board, joist, nail, window frame, and door that they would need, as well as seventy-six pages of instructions. That was the house that we grew up in and that my father lived in. The bungalow was torn down in the thirties and the lumber was used for a chicken house.

I was always aware, I think, of the water in the soil, the way it travels from particle to particle, molecules adhering, clustering, evaporating, heating, cooling, freezing, rising upward to the surface and fogging the cool air or sinking downward, dissolving this nutrient and that, quick in everything it does, endlessly working and flowing, a river sometimes, a lake sometimes. When I was very young, I imagined it ready at any time to rise and cover the earth again, except for the tile lines. Prairie settlers always saw a sea or an ocean of grass, could never think of any other metaphor, since most of them had lately seen the Atlantic. The Davises did find a shimmering sheet punctuated by cattails and sweet flag. The grass is gone, now, and the marshes, "the big wet prairie," but the sea is still beneath our feet, and we walk on it.

– *Jane Smiley*

Albert Goldbarth

Albert Goldbarth lives in Wichita, Kansas. He has been publishing notable books of poetry for over two decades, a number of which gratefully acknowledge fellowship assistance from the NEA. His collections include *Heaven and Earth*, which received the National Book Critics Circle Award, and his most recent volume, *Adventures in Ancient Egypt*. He is also the author of two books of creative nonfiction, *A Sympathy of Souls* and *Great Topics of the World*.

It's tempting to praise the Creative Writing Fellowship program of the National Endowment for the Arts by repeating the wisdom common among my artist friends: that a culture is judged in future generations most honorably when it is judged by its artistic legacy. This is true, but for me, today, it's a little too lofty. My own fellowships from the NEA have meant, much more simply and immediately, a kind of hands-on encouragement (emotional as well as fiscal) when it was most needed; and an immediate implication that artistic production is, as much as the keeping of accounts books or the piling up of weapons, seen as a viable contribution to the ongoing life of one's country. For that, let me yelp a few hurrahs.

…a culture is judged in future generations most honorably when it is judged by its artistic legacy.

Futures

The sky is nearly plaided with the speedy traffic
of boomerang-shape, one-family (or sportier) airmobiles
on the cover of the sci-fi book he's reading, he being
fourteen. He can't abide the present moment, it's so
...crummy, really crummy. He can't start
to see his own next twenty years, whatever
compromise and common, almost begrudgingly kept, fidelities
it's sure to hold. And so he's all of a thousand years
ahead of the rest of his sleeping household,
dreamily leaping over the pinnacled surface of other planets
in silvery gravi-boots: a woman to rescue,
a Star Alliance robo-ship to save. A thousand years

---

ago, (AD 922) the envoy Ibn Fallan witnessed
"the girl who devoted herself to death" be
stabbed, and then pyred alongside a Viking chief
while, otherwheres, one Luitprand of Cremona (AD 950 or so)
was delivered "on the shoulders of two eunuchs"
into the presence of the Emperor of Constantinople, whose throne,
"anon, did float in the air above me." Wonders. Atrocities
and wonders. And though they couldn't foretell the simple
rrrip of a velcro strip, or the tick of an engine cooling down
like the pawl on a slowing carnival wheel, still
these ancient chroniclers would recognize our own
ongoing fears, small courage, and sleeplessness. Speaking

---

of which: while I've been diverting us, someone's awakened.
His mother. She rarely sleeps for more than an hour
now, from the lump's extending its spidery legs.
The doctor says: six months. And so at night she carefully
plans the listed details of her own funeral. The music,
the floral decor (by *individual blossom*), the opening poem.
Her own sure, heart-of-hearts choice for the latter is
Dylan Thomas's "And Death Shall Have No Dominion"
— such a painful, lavish, spilled-out bag of language! — but
her Women's Support Group thinks a "woman poet" more
appropriate, and wields subtle pressures men
would never be allowed. After all, the battle is never over;

there's so much left to be done.

– *Albert Goldbarth*

Bobbie Ann Mason

Bobbie Ann Mason is from Kentucky. She has published two collections of stories and three novels: *Lila + Spence*, *In Country*, and *Feather Crowns*. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the American Academy and Institute for Arts & Letters Award.

I used my NEA fellowship to write my novel, *In Country*, which was published by Harper & Row in 1985. When I began writing my novel, I found my energy was not focused on the work at hand because of the disparate nature and erratic scheduling of the activities required to earn a living. Therefore, the NEA grant came at an opportune time to let me pull back and turn my attention entirely to the novel.

I wanted to do something that would be rich and lasting, but I never expected it to have such popular appeal and tangible social effect. Yet this novel was a surprising commercial success, and it has affected the lives of many people. *In Country* is about a high school girl's quest for knowledge about her father, who died in Vietnam just before she was born. Because of the moment in our history, the subject struck a cord in many readers – especially high school and college students, and Vietnam veterans and their families. *In Country* was also made into a film, which opened the story up to a broader audience.

The NEA grant helped me write the novel, which I did for my own artistic reasons. I report these unexpected benefits that *In Country* brought to the community – from the classroom to the veterans' group to the economy and morale of my own hometown – because I think they are significant in reminding people that what may look like self-indulgence in its beginnings can turn out to have long-reaching, positive effects on the culture.

I wanted to do something that would be rich and lasting, but I never expected it to have such popular appeal and tangible social effect.

from

In Country

Sam walked down a dusty lane with her grandfather. She was seeing the place her dad knew. She was seeing where her mother lived once for a few weeks, where Sam started growing in her belly. Her roots were here, and she had been here often enough for the place to be familiar, but not enough to really know it. She felt she was seeing it for the first time.

"I remember when Dwayne first brought Irene out here," Pap said. "She was just a skinny little squirt like you. Nothing embarrassed her. She went around asking me the name of everything. She got a kick out of Emma's hen-and-chickens cactuses, said they was like pincushions. Imagine that. She picked the biggest bunch of flowers. She went back in the fields along the fence rows and picked daisies and Queen Anne's lace and black-eyed Susans and I don't know what-all. I never would have thought of picking weeds like that. She was raised on a farm, so I was surprised she'd thought of picking them."

"She always liked flowers," Sam said. They were talking about Irene as though she were the one who had died, and when they talked about Dwayne they weren't specific. You should always be specific, Sam thought.

"Country kids are just like the city kids now," Pap said. "They've got more. And they have cars, so they can go running around. Used to, Saturday was when you went to town, but now they take off and go any day of the week."

They talked about Sam's new car for a while, and then Pap said, "Everybody always thought it was something that Dwayne left us such a gift. When you were born, I remember how proud everybody was." He hammered a nail into a fence post. "Everybody expected a boy, of course, but we loved you just the same."

"Everybody wished I was a boy," Sam said, crushing a clover head in her hand. "Did you know my daddy picked the name?" she asked. "He thought it was in the Bible."

"No. I didn't know that. Why, you learn something new every day. Well, I'll say!" he stroked his chin thoughtfully.

While her grandfather worked on the fence, Sam walked down by the creek. She had remembered some wild goose-plum trees in the creek. She found them, but she didn't see any fruit. The trees had honeysuckle vines on them. On a vine she saw a large green stinkbug with an orange spot and a figure eight on its back. Water striders pranced on the shallow pools of clear water in the creek bed. She used to call them Jesus bugs because of the way they walked on water. She looked around the farm, trying to see it in a new way, trying to see what her father had known, the world he knew before he went to Vietnam. These were his memories, what he took with him over there. She thought she could comprehend it. Everything he knew was small and predictable: Jesus bugs, blue mold, hound dogs, fence posts. He didn't know about the new consolidated county high school, rock video, *M*A*S*H*. He didn't know her.

At the house, the dog, outside his pen now, bowed lazily, then lay down in a patch of dirt he had dug in the shade near the flowerbed. His back was covered with scabs. Sam recognized many of the flowers — tall blue stalks, pink droopy flowers, big round yellow faces — but she had no names for them. The rosebushes were insect-eaten. The lilies had dried up. The August sun was beating down. Sam recognized a plant with seed pods forming from some of the flowers. She remembered that when they turned brown those seed pods would explode, scattering their seeds. She remembered the plant's name — touch-me-not.

"I found that diary," Mamaw called to Sam from the porch. "You can have it, but I don't reckon it'll tell you anything. He just set down troop movements and weapons and things like that. It's not loving, like the letters he wrote back. Those was personal. Irene didn't even want this little book, but you can have it if you want it."

Sam reached for the brown spiral notebook. Mamaw was standing on the porch, and Sam was below her on the steps. Sam remembered reaching just this way at graduation when the principal handed her the rolled diploma. But inside the ribbon was a blank piece of paper. The real diplomas were mailed later, because they had come too late from the printer.

Mamaw said, "I remembered that I couldn't even read all of it because I couldn't figure out his handwriting, so I don't expect it'll tell you anything, but at least you'll have something of his." She shooed a cat out the door. "Do you want us to take you out to the graveyard later?" Mamaw said.

"No, not today," Sam said, her eyes on the cat. "I've got to go somewhere."

"Whereabouts?"

"Paducah. I've got to go to Paducah."

– *Bobbie Ann Mason*

Ernest Gaines

Ernest Gaines was born and raised in Louisiana. He is the author of many acclaimed novels, including: *Of Love and Dust, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, A Gathering of Old Men,* and *A Lesson Before Dying* which received the National Book Award. Mr. Gaines has taught at workshops around the world.

When I graduated from San Francisco State College in 1957, I gave myself ten years to see if I could make a living at writing. During that time I wrote five to six hours a day, five days a week. I got part-time jobs to support myself. I worked as a printer's helper a few years, then as a postal worker. I made just enough money to pay the rent for a one-room apartment and to pay for my meals. During those years I received some local recognition: a fellowship to attend Stanford University for a year and the Joseph Henry Jackson Award.

In 1967, my second novel, *Of Love and Dust*, was noticed by the national press, and that same year I received a grant from the NEA. It couldn't have happened at a better time, because I was beginning to have doubts about the possibility of becoming a writer. Writing was all I wanted to do, but I had to support myself as well, and I was not doing a very good job at it. The NEA grant – a thousand dollars at that time – encouraged me to keep writing. I was finally being recognized by critics and my colleagues. The young writer needs that. He needs the money, yes – but he also needs a little recognition now and then to keep pushing himself. I know many young very talented people who gave up out of despair. I feel that I was lucky. The recognition by the NEA gave me enough push to start my next novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. I have not looked back since.

The recognition by the NEA gave me enough push to start my next novel... I have not looked back since.

from

A Lesson Before Dying

I took them back down the quarter. When I stopped in front of Miss Emma's house, my aunt got out of the car with her.

"I'm going to Bayonne," I told my aunt.

She had not shut the door yet.

"I'll be home to cook in a little while," she said.

"I'll eat in town," I told her.

Tante Lou held the door while she stood there looking at me. Nothing could have hurt her more when I said I was not going to eat her food. I was supposed to eat soon after she had cooked, and if I was not at home I was supposed to eat as soon as I came in. She looked at me without saying anything else, then she closed the door quietly and followed Miss Emma into the yard.

I turned the car around and started up the quarter again. There was not a single telephone in the quarter, not a public telephone anywhere that I could use before reaching Bayonne, and Bayonne was thirteen miles away.

After leaving the quarter, I drove down a graveled road for about two miles, then along a paved road beside the St. Charles River for another ten miles. There were houses and big live oak and pecan trees on either side of the road, but not as many on the riverbank side. There, instead of houses and trees, there were fishing wharves, boat docks, nightclubs, and restaurants for whites. There were one or two nightclubs for colored, but they were not very good.

As I drove along the river, I thought about all the schoolwork that I should have been doing at home. But I knew that after being around Miss Emma and Henri Pichot the past hour, I would not have been able to concentrate on my work. I needed to be with someone. I needed to be with Vivian.

Bayonne was a small town of about six thousand. Approximately three thousand five hundred whites; approximately two thousand five hundred colored. It was the parish seat for St. Raphael. The courthouse was there; so was the jail. There was a Catholic church uptown for whites; a Catholic church back of town for colored. There was a white movie theater uptown; a colored movie theater back of town. There were two elementary schools uptown, one Catholic, one public, for whites; and the same back of town for colored. Bayonne's major industries were a cement plant, a sawmill, and a slaughterhouse, mostly for hogs. There was only one main street in Bayonne, and it ran along the St. Charles River. The department stores, the bank, the two or three dentists' and doctors' and attorneys' offices, were mostly on this street, which made up less than half a dozen blocks.

After entering the town, which was marked by the movie theater for whites on the riverbank side of the road, I had to drive another two or three blocks before turning down an unlit road, which led back of town to the colored section. Once I crossed the railroad tracks, I could see the Rainbow Club, with its green, yellow, and red arched neon lights. Several cars were parked before the door; one of them, a big white new '48 Cadillac, belonged to Joe Claiborne, who owned the place. A man and a woman came through the door as I got out of my car to go inside. There were probably a dozen people in the place, half of them at the bar, the rest of them sitting at tables with white tablecloths. I spoke to Joe Claiborne and went through a side door into the café to use the telephone. The tables in the café had checkered red and white tablecloths. Thelma ran the café, and her husband, Joe, ran the bar. I asked her what she had for supper.

"Smothered chicken, smothered beefsteaks, shrimp stew," she said.

There was only one other person in the café, and he sat at the counter eating the stewed shrimps.

"Shrimps any good?" I asked Thelma.

"All my food's good," she said.

"Shrimps," I told her.

– *Ernest Gaines*

Ira Sadoff

Ira Sadoff is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *Emotional Traffic, An Ira Sadoff Reader*, a novel, *Uncoupling*, as well as stories and essays in various literary magazines. He co-founded the literary magazine *Seneca Review* and served as poetry editor of *Antioch Review*. Mr. Sadoff teaches at Colby College and the MFA program at Warren Wilson College. He lives in Hallowell, Maine with his wife Linda and Casey and Julie.

The Fellowship gave me the time and opportunity to write and chronicle my relationship to my neighbors and the Maine landscape, to give voice to other people who lived in my community who neither had the leisure nor training to express in concentrated language their plights or fates.

Additionally, the grant authorized me as a poet in America and the world: poetry does not survive in a market economy, especially an economy driven by international conglomerates (virtually all our major publishers and bookstores are owned by such conglomerates). Poetry does not respond to the profit motive. What it does respond to is a world of feeling, some recognition that we belong to a human community with shared experiences. For a government to support and affirm the art of poetry affirms that we care about our spiritual welfare as well as simply defending ourselves against enemies, real or imagined. A nation without poetry is a nation without a soul.

For a government to support and affirm the art of poetry affirms that we care about our spiritual welfare... A nation without poetry is a nation without a soul.

Pemaquid Point

The lighthouse as an image
of loneliness has its limits.

For as we stand on the shore
of this ocean, the crusted snow

on the granite hills and grass
disguised beneath it, that tower

seems a place where people gather
some vision of themselves: the marriage

of rock to water, of wave to snail
washed up on shore. We're small,

and waving to the lobster boat —
which could be miles away or close

enough to raise our voices to — makes
us wish our journeys took us further,

past witness, to a scene where
we belonged. A man in blue

pulls up his net: tiny fish
swim free of it. And the man

pulling anchor, whose strength
tugs him farther from the shore,

pays tribute to our rootlessness.
As he shouts to start the engine up,

to take his course, he leaves us
in the distance, the repeated ritual

of his wake. And like the water
stirred against the lighthouse wall,

breaking up, wave after wave, we
forget ourselves. Learn our place.

– Ira Sadoff

Linda Pastan

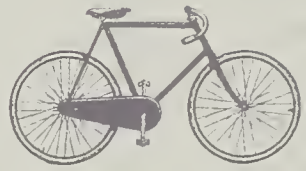
Linda Pastan has published nine volumes of poetry, most recently *Heroes In Disguise* and *An Early Afterlife*. She has been a finalist for the National Book Award and for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. From 1991-95, she was Poet Laureate of Maryland and was on the staff of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference for 20 years. *Carnival Evening: New and Selected Poems, 1968-1998* is due from Norton in the Spring of 1998.

I received my grant in the 1970s, when the NEA and I were both relatively young. It wasn't for a lot of money then, though the dollar did go farther than it does today – but not that far. It did, however, pay for enough child care to get me through a lot of drafts of a lot of poems. More important, at a time when my writing life seemed almost subversive, it lent credibility to my claim that I was a writer, not just to doubting friends and family but more crucially to myself. The mere fact of having been chosen helped give me the courage to continue with my work at times of grave self doubt. In fact it still does.

...having been chosen [for a grant] helped give me the courage to continue with my work at times of grave self doubt.

To a Daughter Leaving Home

When I taught you
at eight to ride
a bicycle, loping along
beside you
as you wobbled away
on two round wheels,
my own mouth rounding
in surprise when you pulled
ahead down the curved
path of the park,
I kept waiting
for the thud
of your crash as I
sprinted to catch up,
while you grew
smaller, more breakable
with distance,
pumping, pumping
for your life, screaming
with laughter,
the hair flapping
behind you like a
handkerchief waving
goodbye.



– *Linda Pastan*

Linda Gregg

Linda Gregg was born in Suffern, New York. She grew up in northern California – in the country. Her books of poetry include *Too Bright to See*, *Alma*, *The Sacraments of Desire*, and *Chosen by the Lion*. She has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writer's Award, and five Pushcart Prizes. Ms. Gregg has taught at the University of Iowa, the University of Houston and others. She is in the woods of Massachusetts trying to finish her new book in time to teach at the University of California, Berkeley in the fall.

The NEA did many things for me as I'm sure it has for other artists. Simply being acknowledged as a serious writer by the government of our country is a wonderful thing to do for anyone in the creative arts. Of course, one of the best things that the NEA grants have done is to allow the time to produce the work. In my case it was especially important because it enabled me to write *Chosen by the Lion*, which is the best book I've ever done.

Simply being acknowledged as a serious writer by the government of our country is a wonderful thing…

To Be Here

The February road to the river is mud
and dirty snow, tire tracks and corncobs
uncovered by the mildness. I think I am
living alone and that I am not afraid.
Love is those birds working hard at flying
over the mountain going somewhere else.
Fidelity is always about what we have
already lived. I am happy, kicking snow.
The trees are the ones to honor. The trees
and the broken corn. And the clear sky
that looks like rain is falling through it.
Not a pretty spring, but the real thing.
The old weeds and the old vegetables.
Winter's graceful severity melting away.
I don't think the dead will speak.
I think they are happy just to be here.
If they did, I imagine them saying
birds flying, twigs, water reflecting.
There is only this. Dead weeds waiting
uncovered to the quiet soft day.

– *Linda Gregg*

Philip Levine

Philip Levine is a poet of many honors. His volume *The Simple Truth* won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize. Among his many titles are *They Feed They Lion*, the award-winning *Ashes* and *Seven Years From Somewhere*. He also has written *The Bread of Time: Toward an Autobiography*.

For many years, he taught writing and English at several universities. He is one of three poets featured on the Internet Poetry Archive (http://www.sunsite.unc.edu/ipa/index.html) where you can hear him read some of his work.

Over the years I've received three grants from the NEA. The first one in 1976, meant the most to me. I had been teaching a very heavy load at California State University at Fresno, and found it increasingly difficult both to teach properly and get my writing done. I had just published my seventh book of poems, *The Names of the Lost*, which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the Lenore Marshall Award.

I took an entire year off teaching and travelled to Spain in order to revive my sense of the landscape and the spiritual, cultural, and political history. Inspired, I returned to Fresno and wrote most of the poems that made up the two books published in '79: *Ashes* and *Seven Years from Somewhere*. These books brought me the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award.

The grant in '81 allowed me to move to New York City where I was able to focus on a poem involving my early years both in that city and the city of my birth, Detroit. In a rented loft on the lower West Side, I was able to bring all that material together in my poem, "Poem With No Ending," the centerpiece of my book *Sweet Will*. The '87 grant gave me the resources to return to Detroit in order to research the poem, "A Walk with Tom Jefferson," the longest and best poem I've ever written.

Had such grants existed when I was in my 30s and early 40s and teaching too much and writing too little, there's no knowing how much more I might have written, but I thank my good fortune that they arrived in time to help me become, for better or worse, the poet I have become.

The '87 grant gave me the resources to return to Detroit in order to research the... longest and best poem I've ever written.

You Can Have It

My brother comes home from work
and climbs the stairs to our room.
I can hear the bed groan and his shoes drop
one by one. You can have it, he says.

The moonlight streams in the window
and his unshaven face is whitened
like the face of the moon. He will sleep
long after noon and waken to find me gone.

Thirty years will pass before I remember
that moment when suddenly I knew each man
has one brother who dies when he sleeps
and sleeps when he rises to face this life,

and that together they are only one man
sharing a heart that always labors, hands
yellowed and cracked, a mouth that gasps
for breath and asks, Am I gonna make it?

All night at the ice plant he had fed
the chute its silvery blocks, and then I
stacked cases of orange soda for the children
of Kentucky, one gray boxcar at a time

with always two more waiting. We were twenty
for such a short time and always in
the wrong clothes, crusted with dirt
and sweat. I think now we were never twenty.

In 1948 in the city of Detroit, founded
by de la Mothe Cadillac for the distant purposes
of Henry Ford, no one wakened or died,
no one walked the streets or stoked a furnace,

for there was no such year, and now
that year has fallen off all the old newspapers,
calendars, doctors' appointments, bonds,
wedding certificates, drivers licenses.

The city slept. The snow turned to ice.
The ice to standing pools or rivers
racing in the gutters. Then bright grass rose
between the thousands of cracked squares,

and that grass died. I give you back 1948.
I give you all the years from then
to the coming one. Give me back the moon
with its frail light falling across a face.

Give me back my young brother, hard
and furious, with wide shoulders and a curse
for God and burning eyes that look upon
all creation and say, You can have it.

– *Philip Levine*

David Mura

David Mura is a poet, creative nonfiction writer, critic, playwright and performance artist. A Sansei or third generation Japanese American, Mura is the author of *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei,* listed in the *New York Times* 1991 Notable Books of Year. Mura's new memoir, *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity,* was published in May 1996. His most recent book of poetry is *The Colors of Desire*, which won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award. His first book of poetry, *After We Lost Our Way*, won the 1989 National Poetry Series Contest. Mura is the Artistic Director of the Asian American Renaissance, an Asian American arts organization in Minnesota. He lives in Minneapolis with his wife, Susan Spencer, a pediatric oncologist, and his three children Samantha, Nikko and Tomo.

"I can't go on. I'll go on."
So says one of the characters in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. This seems to me both a statement about life in general and about writing in particular.

In the beginning, when a writer has few credentials, he or she hears loudly the stern warning, "It is impossible" or "You can't go on." My NEA Fellowship came at a crucial time in my career, when I was in the process of becoming a memoir writer as well as a poet, when I was making a leap from a familiar to an unfamiliar genre. It brought me crucial time to work both on my poetry and on the beginnings of *Turning Japanese*, a book about my year-long stay in Japan and my new understanding and acceptance of my identity and heritage as a Japanese American.

But more than time to write, the fellowship offered me encouragement, a recognition that I was not deluding myself with my pursuit of writing. I feel I've been able to add to the literature of America a new body of work that reflects the stories and concerns of my community and family, material that was not part of my education and which is still neglected in the mass media with its homogenized portraits of who we are. The NEA fellowship was not only for myself but for my community of Japanese Americans and Asian Americans, for the stories within us that still need to be told.

The NEA fellowship was not only for myself but for my community of Japanese Americans and Asian Americans, for the stories within us that still need to be told.

from

Turning Japanese

I am a *Sansei*, a third-generation Japanese-American. In 1984, through luck and through some skills as a poet, I traveled to Japan. My reasons for going were not very clear.

At the time, I'd been working as an arts administrator in the Writers-in-the-Schools program, sending other writers to grade schools and high schools throughout Minnesota. It wasn't taxing, but it didn't provide the long stretches needed to plunge into my own work. I had applied for a U.S./Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship mainly because I wanted time to write.

Japan? That was where my grandparents came from, it didn't have much to do with my present life.

But then Japan had never seemed important to me, even in childhood. On holidays when we would get together with relatives, I didn't notice that the faces around me looked different from most of the faces at school. I didn't notice that my grandfathers were in Japan, my grandmothers dead. No one spoke about them, just as no one spoke about Japan. We were American. It was the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Christmas. All I noticed was that the food we ate — *futomaki, mazegohan, teriyaki, kamaboko* — was different from what I liked best — McDonald's, pizza, hot dogs, tuna-fish salad.

For me Japan was cheap baseballs, Godzilla, weird sci-fi movies like *Star Man*, where you could see the strings that pulled him above his enemies, flying in front of a backdrop so poorly made even I, at eight, was conscious of the fakery. Then there were the endless hordes storming G.I.'s in war movies. Sometimes the Japanese hordes got mixed up in my mind with the Koreans, tiny Asians with squinty eyes mowed down in row after row by the steady shots of John Wayne or Richard Widmark. Before the television set, wearing my ever-present Cubs cap, I crouched near the sofa, saw the enemy surrounding me. I shouted to my men, hurled a grenade. I fired my gun. And the Japanese soldiers fell before me, one by one.

Of course, by the eighties, I was aware, as everyone else was, of Japan's burgeoning power, its changing image — Toyota, Nissan, Sony, Toshiba, the economic, electronic, automotive miracle. Rather than savage barbarism the Japanese were now characterized by a frightening efficiency and a tireless energy. Japan was a monster of industrialization, of huge, world-hungry corporations. Unfair trade practices, the trade imbalance. Robot people.

But none of this had much to do with me. After all, I was a poet.

– *David Mura*

Richard Ford

Richard Ford was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1944 and attended public school there until he entered college in Michigan in 1962. His first novel, *A Piece of My Heart*, was published in 1976. Since then he has published six books of fiction, including novels and stories, as well as many essays. His novel *Independence Day* won both the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the PEN Faulkner Award. His most recent book of stories, *Women With Men*, was published in 1997. He is married to Kristina Ford and lives both in New Orleans and in Chinook, Montana.

I've been lucky enough to get two NEA Fellowships, one in the seventies and one in the eighties, and I'm sure my quota is up. But the first was the most, I'm supposed to say, profound. I'd been ducking regular employment, trying to keep my writing on track, and basically being funded by my wife. The fellowship kept me free from what is misinterpreted to be "honest work" – work for somebody else. I wrote a novel during the year of the Fellowship, and the money helped my wife quit her job and begin thinking of something better to do. What the Fellowship "meant," or at least seemed to mean, apart from these quite practical concerns, was that the great numbers game which young writers often obsess over (I actually didn't, though I was aware of it) was not always destined to play out against me. It meant the world outside my room (I was living in New Jersey at the time) wasn't indifferent to what I was writing; that I had a chance, and wasn't necessarily wasting my time. I've always thought that writing success is measured by readers, and so here were some readers who thought I was okay. Beyond that, being quirkily patriotic, I also thought it was neat that "the government" deemed my work worthwhile. I must have, in fact, French blood in me because I did and still do think that the collective body of a country's artistic efforts (even novelists' efforts) comprises a worthwhile contribution to the nation's well-being.

It meant the world outside my room wasn't indifferent to what I was writing…

from

My Mother, In Memory

After that the life that would take us to the end began. A fragmented, truncated life of visits long and short. Letters. Phone calls. Telegrams. Meetings in cities away from home. Conversations in cars, in airports, train stations. Efforts to see each other. Leaving dominated everything — my growing older, and hers, observed from varying distances.

She held out alone in Mississippi for a year, moved back into the house on Congress Street. She rented out the other side, worked at the hospital, where for a time, I think, the whole new life she'd been handed worked out, came together. I am speculating, as you can believe, because I was gone. But at least she said she liked her job, liked the young interns at the hospital, liked the drama of the ER, liked working even. It may have started to seem satisfactory enough that I was away. It may have seemed to her that there was a life to lead. That under the circumstances she had done reasonably well with things; could ease up, let events happen without fearing the worst. One bad thing did finally turn into something less bad.

This, at least, is what I wanted to think. How a son feels about his widowed mother when he is far away becomes an involved business. But it is not oversimplifying to say that he wants good to come to her. In all these years, the years of fragmented life with my mother, I was aware that things would never be completely right with her again. Partly it was a matter of her choosing; partly it was a matter of her own character — of just how she could see her life without my father, with him gone and so much life left to be lived in an unideal way. Always she was resigned somewhere down deep. I could never plumb her without coming to stop point — a point where expectation simply ceased. This is not to say she was unhappy after enough time had passed. Or that she never laughed. Or that she didn't see life as life, didn't regain and enjoy herself. All those she did. Only, not utterly, not in a way a mother, any mother, could disguise to her only son who loved her. I always saw that. Always felt it. Always felt her — what? — discomfort at life? Her resisting it? Always wished she could relent more than she apparently could; since in most ways my own life seemed to spirit ahead, and I did not like it that hers didn't. From almost the first I felt that my father's death surrendered to me at least as much as it took away. It gave me my life to live by my own designs, gave me my own decisions. A boy could do worse than to lose his father — a good father, at that — just when the world begins to display itself all around him.

– *Richard Ford*

Mona Van Duyn

Mona Van Duyn, the author of nine books of poetry, has won the National Book Award, the Bollingen Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. She is a member of the Academy of Arts and Letters, the Academy of Arts and Sciences, and is a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. In 1992-93, she was Poet Laureate of the United States. She lives in St. Louis.

The NEA grant made it possible for me to concentrate imaginative energy on writing without teaching for a time. It was also, importantly, a sign of respect for my work among the poetry readers and writers of my country.

The NEA grant made it possible for me to concentrate imaginative energy on writing…

Notes from a Suburban Heart

Freud says that ideas are libidinal cathexes,
that is to say, acts of love.

– Norman O. Brown

It's time to put fertilizer on the grass again.
The last time I bought it, the stuff was smelly and black,
and said "made from Philadelphia sewage" on the sack.
It's true that the grass shot up in a violent green,
but my grass-roots patriotism tells me to stick
to St. Louis sewage, and if the Mississippi isn't thick
enough to put in a bag and spread on a lawn,
I'll sprinkle 5-10-5 from nobody's home,
that is to say…

it's been a long winter. The new feeder scared off the birds
for the first month it was up. Those stupid starvelings,
puffed up like popcorn against the cold, thought the thing
was a death-trap. The seeds and suet on its boards
go down their gullets now, and come out song,
but scot-free bugs slit up the garden. It is spring.
I've "made bums out of the birdies," in my next-door neighbor's
words,
that is to say…

your life is as much a mystery to me as ever.
The dog pretends to bite fleas out of sheer boredom,
and not even the daffodils know if it's safe to come
up for air in this crazy, hot-and-cold weather.
Recognitions are shy, the faintest tint of skin
that says we are opening up, is it the same
as it was last year? Who can remember that either?
That is to say,

I love you, in my dim-witted way.

– Mona Van Duyn

William Kittredge

William Kittredge grew up on the MC Ranch in southeastern Oregon, farmed until he was 35, studied at the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, and has just retired as Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Montana. Kittredge has held a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford (1973-74) and received two Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Awards for Excellence (1984,1987), the Montana Governor's Award for the Arts in 1986, and the PEN West Award for nonfictional book of the year in 1992. In October, 1994, Kittredge was presented with the National Endowment for the Humanities' Charles Frankel Prize for service to the humanities. Published widely in national magazines, Kittredge co-authored the nine novels in the *Cord* series of Westerns, published two collections of short stories, *The Van Gogh Field and Other Stories* and *We Are Not In This Together*, as well as a collection of essays, *Owning It All*. He was co-editor of *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology* and co-producer of the film *A River Runs Through It*. His memoir, *Hole in the Sky*, was published in 1992 by Knopf. A book of essays, *Who Owns the West*, was published by Mercury House in 1996, and *The Portable Western Reader* will be published by Viking/Penguin in the summer of 1997.

In my early 30s, during the mid-1960s, working as a ranch foreman in the Great Basin desert country of southeastern Oregon, I began trying to write. I wanted to write because I saw that as a way to have a significant life, by which I mean make my work into a gift, just as books I revered had been gifts to me, helping me define myself and my values.

But a decade later, I was still enormously unsure of myself, floundering and thinking about giving it up, when I got a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a gift of time to work. The grant, as I understood it, was a vote of confidence, given me freely by other writers. As a direct result, I've kept working and continue to work, almost every day. Whatever I've accomplished proceeds in a quite clear line from that first grant. It was, for me, for these reasons, invaluable.

Whatever I've accomplished proceeds in a quite clear line from that first grant.

from

The Politics of Storytelling

The poet C.K. Williams came to Missoula some years ago and spoke of "narrative dysfunction" as a prime part of mental illness in our time. Many of us, he said, lose track of the story of ourselves, the story which tells us who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act.

It isn't any fun, and doesn't just happen to people, it happens to entire societies. Stories are places to live, inside the imagination. We know a lot of them, and we're in trouble when we don't know which one is ours. Or when the one we inhabit doesn't work anymore, and we stick with it anyway.

We live in stories. What we are is stories. We do things because of what is called character, and our character is formed by the stories we learn to live in. Late in the night we listen to our own breathing in the dark, and rework our stories. We do it again the next morning, and all day long, before the looking glass of ourselves, reinventing reasons for our lives. Other than such storytelling there is no reason to things.

Aristotle talks of "recognitions," which can be thought of as moments of insight or flashes of understanding in which we see through to coherencies in the world. We are all continually seeking after such experiences. It's the most commonplace thing human beings do after breathing. We are like detectives, each of us trying to make sense and define what we take to be the right life. It is the primary, most incessant business of our lives.

We figure and find stories, which can be thought of as maps or paradigms in which we see our purposes defined; then the world drifts and our maps don't work anymore, our paradigms and stories fail, and we have to reinvent our understandings, and our reasons for doing things. Useful stories, I think, are radical in that they help us see freshly. They are like mirrors, in which we see ourselves reflected. That's what stories are for, to help us see for ourselves as we go about the continual business of reimagining ourselves.

If we ignore the changing world, and stick to some story too long, we are likely to find ourselves in a great wreck. It's happening all over the West, right now, as so many of our neighbors attempt to live out rules derived from old models of society which simply reconfirm their prejudices.

They see what they want to see. Which is some consolation. But it is not consolation we need. We need direction.

The interior West is no longer a faraway land. Our great emptiness is filling with people, and we are experiencing a time of profound transition, which can be thought of as the second colonization. Many are being reduced to the tourist business, in which locals feature as servants, hunting guides, and motel maids, or local color. People want to enclose our lives in theirs, as decor.

The Native American people were living coherent lives, at one with their circumstances, when our people displaced them, leaving them mostly disenfranchised and cut off from the possibility in our society, their reservations like little beleaguered nations battling to survive in our larger one as we continue wrecking the traditional resources of their cultures. The result, for them, is anomie, nothing to hang on to, powerlessness. We are shamed and look away, and do little to help.

So it is deeply ironic that the Native Americans are being joined in their disenfranchisement by loggers and miners and ranchers, and the towns which depend on them. Our ancestors came to the West and made homes for themselves, where they could live independent lives. Because of their sacrifices, we in the dominant society think we own the West, we think they earned it for us. But, as we know, nobody owns anything absolutely, except their sense of who they are.

– *William Kittredge*

Ron Hansen

Ron Hansen grew up in Omaha, Nebraska and was educated at Creighton University, the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop, and Stanford University, where he held a Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship. In addition to his short story collection, *Nebraska*, he has written the novels *Desperadoes*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *Mariette in Ecstasy*, and most recently, *Atticus*, which was a finalist for the National Book Award and the PEN/Faulkner Award in Fiction. He is presently the Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. Professor in the Arts and Humanities at Santa Clara University.

I have been awarded two National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowships. The honor was good for my spirits, but more importantly, the funds really made a difference, for though my fiction writing was earning praise, I was still quite poor, and the hard and continuing effort to make ends meet was interfering with my production. With the help of those two fellowships, I was able to complete two books, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, which was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award in Fiction, and a book of stories called *Nebraska*, for which I won an award in literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

The honor was good for my spirits, but more importantly, the funds really made a difference…

from

Nebraska

Everyone is famous in this town. And everyone is necessary. Townspeople go to the Vaughn Grocery Store for the daily news, and to the Home Restaurant for history class, especially an evensong when the old people eat graveled pot roast and lemon meringue pie and calmly sip coffee from cups they tip to their mouths with both hands. The Kiwanis Club meets here on Tuesday nights, and hopes are made public, petty sins are tidily dispatched, and the proceeds from the gumball machine are tallied up and poured into the upkeep of a playground. Yutesler's Hardware has picnic items and kitchen appliances in its one window, in the manner of those prosperous men who would prefer to be known for their hobbies. And there is one crisp, white, Protestant church with a steeple, of the sort pictured on calendars; and the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, grayly holding the town at bay like a Gothic wolfhound. And there is an insurance agency, a county coroner and justice of the peace, a secondhand shop, a handsome chiropractor named Koch who coaches the Pony League baseball team, a post office approached on unpainted wood steps outside of a cheap mobile home, the Nighthawk tavern where there's Falstaff tap beer, a green pool table, a poster recording the Cornhuskers scores, a crazy man patiently tolerated, a gray-haired woman with an unmoored eye, a boy in spectacles thick as paperweights, a carpenter missing one index finger, a plump waitress whose day job is in a basement beauty shop, an old woman who creeps up to the side door at eight in order to purchase one shot glass of whiskey.

And yet passing by, and paying attention, an outsider is only aware of what isn't, that there's no bookshop, no picture show, no pharmacy or dry cleaners, no cocktail parties, extreme opinions, jewelry or piano stores, motels, hotels, hospital, political headquarters, philosophical theories about Being and the soul.

High importance is only attached to practicalities, and so there is the Batchelor Funeral Home, where a proud old gentleman is on display in a dark brown suit, his yellow fingernails finally clean, his smeared eyeglasses in his coat pocket, a grandchild on tiptoes by the casket, peering at the lips that will not move, the sparrow chest that will not rise. And there's Tommy Seymour's for Sinclair gasoline and mechanical repairs, a green balloon dinosaur bobbing from a string over the cash register, old tires piled beneath the cottonwood. For Sale in the sideyard a Case tractor, a John Deere reaper, a hay mower, a red manure spreader, and a rusty grain conveyor, green weeds overcoming them, standing up inside them, trying slyly and little by little to inherit machinery for the earth.

And beyond that are woods, a slope of pasture, six empty cattle pens, a driveway made of limestone pebbles, and the house where Alice Sorensen pages through a child's World Book Encyclopedia, stopping at the descriptions of California, Capetown, Ceylon, Colorado, Copenhagen, Corpus Christi, Costa Rica, Cyprus.

Widow Dworak had been watering the lawn in an open raincoat and apron, but at nine she walks the green hose around to the spigot and screws down the nozzle so that the spray is a misty crystal bowl softly baptizing the ivy. She says, "How about some camomile tea?" And she says, "Yum. Oh, boy. That hits the spot." And bends to shut the water off.

The Union Pacific night train rolls through town just after ten o'clock when a sixty-year-old man named Adolf Schooley is a boy again in bed, and when the huge weight of forty or fifty cars jostles his upstairs room like a motor he'd put a quarter in. And over the sighing industry of the train, he can hear the train saying *Nebraska, Nebraska, Nebraska*. And he cannot sleep.

– *Ron Hansen*

Teresa Jordan

Teresa Jordan is the author of the memoir, *Riding the White Horse Home*, and *Cowgirls: Women of the American West*, and she has edited two anthologies of Western women's writing. She lives on a small ranch in northern Nevada with her husband, folklorist Hall Cannon, and is currently at work on a novel, *Sleeping with the Animals*.

My NEA Literature fellowship gave me breathing space, a chance to step back from the day-to-day necessity of earning a living and experiment. Up to that point, I had written primarily nonfiction. During my NEA year, I wrote fiction. By the end of it, a cast of characters had walked into my life and peopled an imaginary place. My first novel, *Sleeping with the Animals*, was well on its way.

My NEA Literature fellowship gave me breathing space, a chance to step back from the day-to-day necessity of earning a living and experiment.

Old Anne

the arm that hadn't healed right would not bend
to hold a hairbrush. "Hack it off!"
Old Anne said of her braid, that braid like blood
flung from the heart, so long a part of her,
that thick grey snake slung heavy down her back.
Young Charlotte, wide-eyed Charlotte, stroked the shears,
reached out her hand to touch the braid, drew back —
"Please, child," Anne said, "don't be afraid to help me."
So Charlotte cut, and Old Anne closed her grey
sun-tired eyes. The hacking made her think
of falling, the colt falling, rain-soaked limestone soil
slick as oil — slicker — and a boulder field
cut jagged at the bottom of the hill.
The heavy braid hung loosely now by just a few thin strands;
The scissors sawed one last time through, it fell.
The soft thud she remembered just before
she woke, before the pain set in; the young horse,
stunned on top of her, had just begun to twitch.

– *Teresa Jordan*

Maxine Kumin

Maxine Kumin has published 11 books of poems, four novels, a collection of short stories, and three collections of essays. She won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973 for her fourth book, *Up Country*. *Looking for Luck* won the Poets' Prize in 1994 and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award that year. Now a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, Kumin was a Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 1980-81. She has taught at a number of universities, including Princeton, Columbia and MIT and is the McGee Professor of Writing at Davidson College in the Spring of 1997. Kumin lives on a farm in New Hampshire where she and her husband raise horses and vegetables.

Winning a National Council on the Arts Fellowship in 1967 was a rich affirming moment in my life. It said that I was indeed a writer, not merely a self-proclaimed one, and it gave me the courage to persist as a poet in a climate that was not hugely welcoming to women poets.

[The fellowship] gave me the courage to persist as a poet in a climate that was not hugely welcoming to women poets.

Appetite

I eat these
wild red raspberries
still warm from the sun
and smelling faintly of jewelweed
in memory of my father

tucking the napkin
under his chin and bending
over an ironstone bowl
of the bright drupelets
awash in cream

my father
with the sigh of a man
who has seen all and been redeemed
said time after time
as he lifted his spoon

men kill for this.

– *Maxine Kumin*

Robert Pinsky

Robert Pinsky grew up in the New Jersey coastal town of Long Branch. His books include *The Want Bone*, *History of My Heart* (awarded the William Carlos Williams Prize of the Poetry Society of America), and *An Explanation of America*. He teaches in Boston University's graduate writing program. His translation of *The Inferno of Dante* was awarded the Landon Translation Prize and *The Los Angeles Times* Book Award in poetry for 1995. His *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems* was published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in Spring, 1996. His collection of essays, *Poetry and the World*, was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award in criticism. In the fall of 1997, he will begin his term as the U.S. Poet Laureate.

My NEA grant gave me practical help and encouragement at a time when I needed it, with small children, teaching responsibilities, and the struggle to write. A perhaps neglected virtue of these grants is the encouragement they give many of us in our humanistic work aside from writing; I think I was made a better teacher and a more devoted teacher of students who were or became teachers, because I was confirmed by the NEA grant in my devotion to the project of art. However good our writing is or is not, we labor to keep a certain light alive.

I think I was made a better teacher...
because I was confirmed by the NEA grant
in my devotion to the project of art.

The Street Of Furthest Memory

The street flails
old substances, a chaff
of felt, beaver-board

slate shingles, tarpaper — plain
or made to resemble masonry
and brick —, oilcloth, sharkskin.

In a film of rain, the street
shines. Luncheonette,
lot, shoemaker,

They get clearer
in the rain, a spring rain
patched with sun,

the bright drops on glass,
on awnings of canvas, on cars
moving down the street

as the awnings flap,
flickering like a torn
film, coupe and sedan passing

to beyond your earliest
memory, on the street
out of memory, the sweet

street flailing its
lost substances, tangling
off as though thrown

from the spinning black
reel, unthreading rapidly, like
panic flailing the street.

– *Robert Pinsky*

Joy Harjo

Joy Harjo is a poet, writer, essayist, teacher, and saxophonist with the jazz band Poetic Justice which has just issued a new CD, "Letter from the End of the 21st Century." Her most recent collection is *The Women Who Fell From the Sky*. She is also the author of *The Spiral of Memory: Interviews*, and has a forthcoming anthology of Native women's writing of North America to be published by Norton next Spring. She has won the Academy of American Poets Award, the Josephine Miles Award for Poetry, and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America. Joy Harjo lives in New Mexico.

When I received my first NEA fellowship for poetry, I was a single parent with two children who were four and nine years old, and I had just graduated from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. I had published a chapbook as an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico and while a graduate student had completed a manuscript that would soon by published by I. Reed Books. I did not have a job waiting me upon graduation, and as far as I knew, I would have to resort to waitressing or working in a hospital when I returned to New Mexico.

Though I was fueled on pure faith and bravado, I wasn't sure how I'd pull it off this time. Maybe I had just made up a life that included a reach toward something no one in my immediate family either understood or recognized. My mother was a cook, my father worked as a sheet-metal worker.

The awarding of the NEA grant came at this crucial time. It gave me faith to continue, as well as a paycheck of sorts to write until I secured a job (which I did, teaching creative writing at the Institute of American Indian Arts). With the time the grant bought, I was able to buy childcare, pay rent and utilities, and my car payments while I wrote what would be most of my second book of poetry, *She Had Some Horses*, the collection that actually started my career. The grant began the momentum that has carried me through these years. I can now call myself a poet.

My mother is still waiting for me to write a "real" book. My father has since died, but his family now thinks poetry makes all the sense in the world.

The grant began the momentum that has carried me through these years. I can now call myself a poet.

Perhaps The World Ends Here

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of the earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy. with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

– *Joy Harjo*

Paul Auster

Paul Auster is a novelist, essayist, poet, and translator. His novels include *The Music of Chance*, which was nominated for the 1991 PEN/Faulkner Award, *Moon Palace*, *In the Country of Last Things*, *Mr. Vertigo*, and the three novels known as *The New York Trilogy*. He has also written a memoir, *The Invention of Solitude*; a collection of essays, *The Art of Hunger*; and a volume of poems, *Disappearances*. Mr. Auster also wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke*. He has a new book coming out in the fall of 1997.

Both grants made an enormous difference, relieving me of intense financial pressures and giving me time to do the work I had in me to do. The money took care of my most basic needs (food, rent), and suddenly, for the first time in my life, I had some breathing room, a chance to hunker down and write without worrying how I was going to pay that month's bills. The second grant allowed me to finish *City of Glass* (the first volume of my New York Trilogy), and I mark that year as a turning point in my progress as a writer. The Endowment's help was crucial – a rope thrown to a drowning man – and I am forever thankful to the good people who rescued me.

"...the years have taught me this: if there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it."

from

Why Write?

I was eight years old. At that moment in my life, nothing was more important to me than baseball. My team was the New York Giants, and I followed the doings of those men in the black-and-orange caps with all the devotion of a true believer. Even now, remembering that team — which no longer exists, which played in a ballpark that no longer exists — I can reel off the names of nearly every player on the roster. Alvin Dark, Whitey Lockman, Don Mueller, Johnny Antonelli, Monte Irvin, Hoyt Wilhelm. But none was greater, none more perfect nor more deserving of worship than Willie Mays, the incandescent Say Hey kid.

That spring, I was taken to my first big-league game. Friends of my parents had box seats at the Polo Grounds, and one April night a group of us went to watch the Giants play the Milwaukee Braves. I don't know who won, I can't recall a single detail of the game, but I do remember that after the game was over my parents and their friends sat talking in their seats until all the other spectators had left. It got so late that we had to walk across the diamond and leave by the center-field exit, which was the only one still open. As it happened, that exit was right below the players' locker rooms.

Just as we approached the wall, I caught sight of Willie Mays. There was no question about who it was. It was Willie Mays, already out of uniform and standing there in his street clothes not ten feet away from me. I managed to keep my legs moving in his direction and then, mustering every ounce of my courage, I forced some words out of my mouth. "Mr. Mays," I said, "could I please have your autograph?"

He had to have been all of twenty-four years old, but I couldn't bring myself to pronounce his first name.

His response to my question was brusque but amiable. "Sure, kid, sure," he said. "You got a pencil?" He was so full of life, I remember, so full of youthful energy, that he kept bouncing up and down as he spoke.

I didn't have a pencil, so I asked my father if I could borrow his. He didn't have one, either. Nor did my mother. Nor, as it turned out, did any of the other grownups.

The great Willie Mays stood there watching in silence. When it became clear that no one in the group had anything to write with, he turned to me and shrugged. "Sorry, kid," he said. "Ain't got no pencil, can't give no autograph." And then he walked out of the ballpark into the night.

I didn't want to cry, but tears started falling down my cheeks, and there was nothing I could do to stop them. Even worse, I cried all the way home in the car. Yes, I was crushed with disappointment, but I was also revolted at myself for not being able to control those tears. I wasn't a baby. I was eight years old, and big kids weren't supposed to cry over things like that. Not only did I not have Willie Mays' autograph, but I didn't have anything else, either. Life had put me to the test, and in all respects I had found myself wanting.

After that night, I started carrying a pencil with me wherever I went. It became a habit of mine never to leave the house without making sure I had a pencil in my pocket. It's not that I had any particular plans for that pencil, but I didn't want to be unprepared. I had been caught empty-handed once, and I wasn't about to let it happen again.

If nothing else, the years have taught me this: if there's a pencil in your pocket, there's a good chance that one day you'll feel tempted to start using it. As I like to tell my children, that's how I became a writer.

– *Paul Auster*

Kaye Gibbons

Kaye Gibbons was born in Nash County, North Carolina, in 1960. Her first novel, *Ellen Foster* was published while she was a student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Since then, she has written four novels: *A Virtuous Woman*, *A Cure For Dreams*, *Charms for the Easy Life*, and *Sights Unseen*. She has received awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the *Chicago Tribune*, and PEN American Center.

Before I received an NEA Literature Fellowship in 1989, I did not have the money for the February rent. But that grant enabled me to pay the rent, feed the children, and work in peace. However, I never saw the grant as something to which I was entitled. I felt that I could contribute something of value to the body of American letters and therefore to my country. Because of the book I wrote with the grant and because of subsequent books, I have since paid over $750,000 in Federal income tax. The government has been more than repaid for its investment in my work, and for that, we should both be grateful.

I never saw the grant as something to which I was entitled. I felt that I could contribute something of value to the body of American letters and therefore to my country.

from

Ellen Foster

When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy. I would figure out this or that way and run it down through my head until it got easy.

The way I liked best was letting go a poisonous spider in his bed. It would bite him and he'd be dead and swollen up and I would shudder to find him so. Of course I would call the rescue squad and tell them to come quick something's the matter with my daddy. When they come in the house I'm all in a state of shock and just don't know how to act what with two colored boys heaving my dead daddy onto a roller cot. I just stand in the door and look like I'm shaking all over.

But I did not kill my daddy. He drank his own self to death the year after the County moved me out. I heard how they found him shut up in the house dead and everything. Next thing I know he's in the ground and the house is rented out to a family of four.

All I did was wish him dead real hard every now and then. And I can say for a fact that I am better off now than when he was alive.

I live in a clean brick house and mostly I am left to myself. When I start to carry an odor I take a bath and folks tell me how sweet I look.

There is plenty to eat here and if we run out of something we just go to the store and get some more. I had me an egg sandwich for breakfast, mayonnaise on both sides. And I may fix me another one for lunch.

Two years ago I did not have much of anything. Not that I live in the lap of luxury now but I am proud for the schoolbus to pick me up here every morning. My stylish well-groomed self standing in the front yard with the grass green and the hedge bushes square.

I figure I made out pretty good considering the rest of my family is either dead or crazy.

Every Tuesday a man comes and gets me out of social studies and we go to a room and talk about it all.

Last week he spread out pictures of flat bats for me to comment on. I mostly saw flat bats. Then I saw big holes a body could fall right into. Big black deep holes through the table and the floor. And then he took off his glasses and screwed his face up to mine and tells me I'm scared.

I used to be but I am not now is what I told him. I might get a little nervous but I am never scared.

– Kaye Gibbons

Larry Watson

Larry Watson was born in Rugby, North Dakota and raised in Bismarck. He is the author of the novel *In a Dark Time*, a book of poetry, *Leaving Dakota,* and the novels *Justice*, *Montana 1948*, and *White Crosses*. In 1993, *Montana 1948* received the Milkweed National Fiction Prize, the Mountain & Plains Bookseller Association Regional Book Award, and was named one of the Best Books of the Year by both *Library Journal* and *Booklist*. He teaches English at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point.

On that January day, my writing career felt like the weather forecast – cold and getting colder. Since my first novel had been published seven years earlier, I had been struggling. I'd managed to publish a few poems and short stories and an occasional book review, but these rewards were so scattered that I began to doubt whether the time I spent writing was justifiable, especially since any hour I spent at the typewriter meant an hour that I wouldn't spend with my family or on my teaching.

Then I opened the envelope and learned that I had won a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. My wife remembers that I pumped my fist in the air as though I had just made the winning basket, but to tell the truth, it wasn't the elation of victory that I was feeling. It was relief. I was relieved to learn that someone – in this case, an agency of the government – not only believed my efforts were justified but wanted to encourage me to continue. What's more, the NEA believed this on the basis of my work alone, without regard for my reputation (or lack of one), my personal history, or my financial status.

Oh, the money was nice. I had a heavy teaching load at the time, and the endowment allowed me to teach less and write more for a few semesters. But the greatest gift the NEA gave me was its vote of confidence – and my subsequent sense of validation as a writer.

As I recall, the rest of that winter was remarkably mild.

…the NEA believed [my efforts were justified] on the basis of my work alone, without regard for my reputation (or lack of one), my personal history, or my financial status.

from

Justice

The wind rattled the window in its frame, and Gail reacted instinctively, huddling deeper under the blankets. When she was a child, that north wind meant the long walk to school would be even colder. She tried to think — when David started school, which route would he walk? Which street would offer him the most protection from the winter wind? Gail realized that she was moving in her mind through the streets of Bentrock, Montana. Of course, that was her son's home, his birthplace, where his father and paternal grandparents lived.

Now that she thought of it, Wesley's father was the only man who had held David. When they brought the baby home from the hospital, Wesley's parents were waiting for them. They had brought gifts — baby cloths and a blanket and a rattle shaped like a dumbbell, and a new rocking chair with a can seat ("for Gail when she has to get up from those 2:00 A.M. feedings").

Enid Hayden carefully folded the blanket away from David, exposing his red, wrinkled face. Julian Hayden practically grabbed David from Gail's arms. He lifted the baby high above his head. Gail was sure she saw David's eyes widen in alarm, and she thought she heard Wesley gasp. But neither of them said a word while Julian continued to hold their son aloft. "How does it feel to be home, boy?" Julian asked his grandson. "How does it feel to breathe this air?"

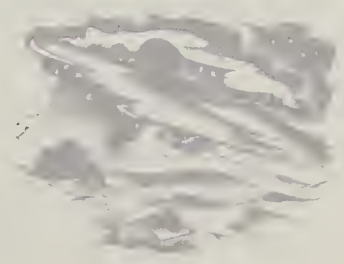
Gail had been in North Dakota for almost three days, and her own father had not yet held David. What was the matter with these men — did they think a baby was so fragile that it could be crushed or broken in their arms? Did they think their hands were unsuited for holding a child? That their hands were soiled with dirt and misdeeds and therefore unfit to touch the clean, the innocent? My God, what did they think human hands were for?

The wind gusted even harder, and Gail heard another familiar sound, like handfuls of sand being thrown against the glass. She knew what that meant: the wind had brought snow, fine-grained and icy, down from the north. This time Gail did not burrow deeper under the quilt. She threw the blankets off and went to the bassinet to make certain David hadn't wriggled loose from his blankets.

To her astonishment, the baby was already awake. He was struggling to lift his head as if he was desperate to see above and beyond the white wicker walls of his bassinet. His fingers clenched and unclenched, and his legs kicked determinedly as if they could find purchase in the thin cold morning air.

His mouth worked and contorted with the effort to suckle or cry or both, but for the moment Gail just watched him. As soon as he made a sound, as soon as he found a voice, she would pick him up. But not before.

– *Larry Watson*



Rita Dove

Rita Dove was born in Akron, Ohio in 1952 and educated at Miami University of Ohio, Universität Tübingen in Germany, and the University of Iowa. She has published the poetry collections *The Yellow House on the Corner*, *Museum*, *Thomas and Beulah*, *Grace Notes*, *Selected Poems*, and *Mother Love*, a book of short stories *Fifth Sunday*, the novel *Through the Ivory Gate*, essays under the title *The Poet's World*, and the play *The Darker Face of the Earth* (first production 1996, Oregon Shakespeare Festival). She has received numerous literary and academic honors, among them the 1987 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry, the 1996 Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities, and the 1996 Charles Frankel Prize; from 1993 to 1995, she served as Poet Laureate of the United States and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Rita Dove is Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where she lives with her husband and daughter.

In 1978, I was a young poet, fresh out of graduate school, who had not yet published her first volume of poetry. The fellowship not only gave me a boost in confidence, but it also allowed me to dedicate concentrated periods of time to the development of my art. I was able to regard the fellowship as a "nest egg," so that I was not forced to accept the first teaching job offered me (which would have surely delayed the publication of my first poetry book by several years); instead, I could live frugally and write full time for a year.

Of course, it is impossible for me to say what I would have done had I not received a fellowship; I can only say that I believe the course of my literary career would have been markedly different. Because of my gratitude, I have served on several panels for the Endowment – my way of repaying, in part, the support and encouragement provided me at a young and tentative age.

I was able to regard the fellowship as a "nest egg," so that… I could live frugally and write full time for a year.

Small Town

Someone is sitting in the red house.
There is no way of telling who it is, although
the woman, indistinct, in the doorway must know;
and the man in the chestnut tree
who wields the binoculars
does not wish to be seen from the window.

The paint was put there by a previous owner.
The dog in the flower bed
is bound by indiscriminate love,
which is why he does not bark
and why in one of the darkened rooms
someone sits, a crackling vacuum.

The woman wears a pale blue nightgown
and stares vaguely upward. The man,
whose form appears clearly among the leaves,
is not looking at her
so much as she at him,
while away behind the town a farmer
weeps, plowing his fields by night
to avoid being laughed at during the day.

– *Rita Dove*

Diane Glancy

Diane Glancy is from Oklahoma and now is associate professor at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Her novel, *Pushing the Bear,* about the 1838 Trail of Tears was published by Harcourt Brace in 1996. A second novel, *The Only Piece of Furniture in the House*, was published by Moyer Bell, also in 1996. A collection of nine plays, *War Cries*, and a new collection of essays, *The West Pole*, were published in 1997.

My NEA grant came in 1990 which was a pivotal year for me. I had finished a MFA program and began teaching at a small college. It gave me money to take summers and intercessions off to write. A poetry collection, *Lone Dog's Winter Count*, and a short story collection, *Firesticks*, came from it. Also time to work on my novel, *Pushing the Bear*, about the 1938 Trail of Tears. It was the substantiation as well as the money which gave me hope and confidence that there was a way for me to do what I had set out to do. I am very grateful.

It was the substantiation as well as the money which gave me hope and confidence that there was a way for me to do what I had set out to do.

from

Lead Horse

Rain blew through the screen. Nattie stood in the open door. Feeling the spray on her face.

A tree in the backyard slammed its door. Or maybe it was the room upstairs. The windows were still open.

Her backyard bushes beat the ground. Back and forth their fists pounded the grass.

Let the curtains stand straight out. Let the storm stomp-dance through her house. Rattle her plastic dress-bags hanging on the door. Her shawl-fringe and feathers.

She watched the lid to the trash can fly across the yard like a war shield. She watched the leaves buck.

What's the battle out there, Nattie? Joes said. He scratched his ear when Nattie looked at him.

The wind wheezed through the weatherstripping on the door. The whole yard shook. And it was the day of a family birthday. A relative Nattie only wanted to send a card to, usually, but now she was on her way, and the cousins were going to show up and Nattie had a sink full of dishes and a war in the yard and Joes at the table. And he was starting to hum like electricity on the backyard wire.

It's a lot for one old woman, she thought.

It'll be over soon, Joes comforted.

The relatives or the storm?

The trees raised and bowed their arms in exaggerated motions as if the cousins already pulled in the drive. But the relatives were out there under an underpass in their car. The old green Plymouth tossing a little in the gusts of wind. Chewing them but not yet swallowing. Jerking all the while with pleasure Nattie could only imagine.

She was making her corn chowder and cornbread and corn pudding. She should have said she'd meet them at Benny Bill's Ranchero. They could have a steak and dance. But the cousins didn't like that. She could outdude them any time. In fact, they couldn't dude at all. Yes. What a storm-sash she was.

But Joes could still make her blush. And the cousins were coming and she was supposed to cowtow and lick their fritters. The trees swept their arms. The storm shuttered over the house. Horse hooves running.

Still the rain torpedoed the house. Just like Crouper and Boaz, the cousins, when they were boys, roughhousing upstairs and you wanted to yell at them to stop.

You going to close that door, Nat?

When I'm ready.

She'd seen the highway once from a place. The one time she flew. She'd felt the invisible cord that jerks a plane into the sky. A pull-toy right up to the clouds where the highway and its cloverleaf looked like cucumber pickles in a jar, the tight highway loops like curls of onion.

Maybe a spirit fell to the yard, flailing, by the looks of it. The arms and legs struggling to get up and disappear before someone could look from her house and say, hey, there's a spirit out there. The splot between the elm and the oak, and the bushes beating it away. No, the wisteria didn't want any fallen spirit in their yard. Something was being swept out of the Hunting Grounds. The Great Spirit had his war stick out. The old hammock wind-danced.

Then Joes was at the door with her. Kissing her jaw. Rubbing his fingers across her back. Sometimes his hand went just under the fatty part of her hip.

Keep your hands on your own self, she said.

Lightning cracked so loud Nattie closed the door.

– Diane Glancy

Kim Stafford

Kim Stafford was born in Oregon, and is Director of the Northwest Writing Institute, Lewis & Clark College, in Portland. He is the author of nine books of poetry, essays, and fiction, including *Across Road* and *Having Everything Right*.

The support I received from the NEA shifted my sense of writing from a private exercise in expression to a public contribution to culture of my country. The NEA helped me enlarge my sense of profession to include writing for multiple audiences, teaching beyond schools, and writing as a kind of ambassador from the future reaching back to lay a foundation for the kind of world we want our children to inhabit. The NEA makes the work of art more generous and inclusive, a national economy of ideas. Without this economy, we are poor.

[The NEA grant] shifted my sense of writing from a private exercise in expression to a public contribution to culture of my country.

from

Having Everything Right

You have to listen real hard to hear anything at all: a little snow ticking down through the juniper trees; the click of the chain around a family plot flexing in the cold. Wind. You hear it quite a while before it arrives. Then the eastern half of your face might just as well be stone.

Ten years ago I was here to do a formal study of the cemetery layout. As part of my folkloristic fieldwork, I made a systematic ramble of thirteen central Oregon cemeteries, stepping respectfully in the August dust of memorial plots at Grizzly, Antelope, Ashwood, Grandview, Madras, Hay Creek, Bakeoven, Warm Springs, Simnashio, Camp Polk, and three without names. I wanted to know how the adjacent communities of the living marked, surveyed, and maintained these trim little cities of stone and sage. I wanted to know how many gravemarkers listed family relations, military rank, professions, hobbies, wise proverbs, and the verse of grief or hope. I wanted to know how these stretches of sacred ground were isolated from the cattle range surrounding them: wood fence, iron gate, barbed wire, poplar square. On the main street of how many towns would there be a sign for the "Cemetery: 2 miles"? How many plots would be local secrets tucked away up a side canyon?

I wanted to seek and listen, to map and ponder the visible artifacts of religious belief my people hold. I did all that. The study is in the archive. The memory works on me.

But now it's dusk at Camp Polk, and I'm visiting old friends. Here's Ray, by the champion juniper gnarl he loved to paint. His name in my mouth brings up a riff of banjo jangle I heard him play. There's a snow-swirl dancer over his place now.

I remember my discovery ten years ago, that graves everywhere planted heads to the west. This marks the Christian readiness to rise up facing Christ as He will bloom from the east on Judgment Day. And I remember how many of the thirteen cemeteries marked the end of a dead-end road: the Ashwood plot up a dirt track with no sign. The Grizzly cemetery at the ripe heart of a wheatfield with no road at all, forgotten like the town of Grizzly itself, which some prosperous corporation bought. I drove around and around that field, knowing I was close, my map fluttering from my hand in the heat, until finally I squinted my eyes past the shimmering wheat and saw the cemetery fence out there in the middle of everything.

Somewhere near the cemetery here at Camp Polk, a hundred odd years ago, the U.S. Army buried a cannon before fleeing from the Indians. Treasure hunters have sought it, as if it were a memory they owned by rights, as if that brass body might be raised up and carried away. You have to brave a series of "No Trespassing" signs to get to Camp Polk. Ten years ago there was a sign to invite visitors on toward the cemetery on its little hill beyond the most handsome of falling barns. This evening, there is no sign. You have to know.

Driving into Shaniko, on my cemetery route in 1975, I remember slowing the car to ask directions of an old-timer crumpled easily beside a shed, whittling steadily at a stub of wood. I didn't realize until too late the impertinence of my opening question: "Excuse me, sir, could you direct me to the cemetery?"

There was a tremendous pause, as he turned slowly up from his work to unroll a vacant smile. No answer was on the way. I thanked him, and drove on to the Eat Cafe. This time, I tried to be a bit more discreet, making my request in hushed tones to the waitress as she came rollicking across the room with half a dozen steaming plates along her arms.

"Excuse me, I'm trying to find the cemetery — for research."

She lurched expertly to a stop without jostling a plate, and shouted to the long table of white-haired ladies at the far end of the room, "Hey girls, we got a cemetery?" They vaguely shook their heads.

"Mister," she said, "we ain't got one. Try Antelope." I explained that I had already been there, and learned what I could.

"Well," she said, "then I don't think we can help you. We don't figure to do much dying in *this* town."

– *Kim Stafford*

Annie Dillard

Annie Dillard has published poetry, short stories, criticism, memoirs, essays and a novel. Her books include *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel*, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* – which won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize, *An American Childhood*, *The Writing Life*, and the novel *The Living*. She has taught at several universities and lived in Virginia, the Pacific Northwest, Connecticut and Florida. *An American Childhood* is her story of growing up in the '50s in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

The grant freed me from teaching and enabled me to write two books: a book of thoughts about contemporary fiction, *Living by Fiction*, and a book of essays, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*. The Boston Globe generously called the latter one of the ten best books of the 1980s; oddly enough, Outside magazine listed it as one of the ten best books of the past 25 years. Anthologists often use selections from both the books.

I try to describe what it feels like to be alive in the United States. My books are about rural Virginia, about Pittsburgh, about the Pacific Northwest Coast.... Literature has all my heart and mind. That the NEA supports literature in the United States enhances and confirms our cultural status. All civilized nations support artists; we know nations by their works of art.

All civilized nations support artists; we know nations by their works of art.

from

An American Childhood

When everything else has gone from my brain — the President's name, the state capitals, the neighborhoods where I lived, and then my own name and what it was on earth I sought, and then at length the faces of my friends, and finally the faces of my family — when all this has dissolved, what will be left, I believe, is topology: the dreaming memory of land as it lay this way and that.

I will see the city poured rolling down the mountain valleys like slag, and see the city lights sprinkled and curved around the hills' curves, rows of bonfires winding. At sunset a red light like housefires shines from the narrow hillside windows; the houses' bricks burn like glowing coals.

The three wide rivers divide and cool the mountains. Calm old bridges span the banks and link the hills. The Allegheny River flows in brawling from the north, from near the shore of Lake Erie, and from Lake Chautauqua in New York and eastward. The Monongahela River flows in shallow and slow from the south, from West Virginia. The Allegheny and Monongahela meet and form the westward-wending Ohio.

Where the two rivers join lies an acute point of flat land from which rises the city. The tall buildings rise lighted to their tips. Their lights illumine other buildings' clean sides, and illumine the narrow city canyons below, where people move, and shine reflected red and white at night from the black waters.

When the shining city, too, fades, I will see only those forested mountains and hills, and the way the rivers lie flat and moving among them, and the way the low land lies wooded among them, and the blunt mountains rise in darkness from the rivers' banks, steep from the rugged south and rolling from the north, and from farther, from the inclined eastward plateau where the high ridges begin to run so long north and south unbroken that to get around them you practically have to navigate Cape Horn.

In those first days, people said, a squirrel could run the long length of Pennsylvania without ever touching the ground. In those first days, the woods were white oak and chestnut, hickory, maple, sycamore, walnut, wild ash, wild plum, and white pine. The pine grew on the ridgetops where the mountains' lumpy spines stuck up and their skin was thinnest.

The wilderness was uncanny, unknown. Benjamin Franklin had already invented his stove in Philadelphia by 1735, and Thomas Jefferson was a schoolboy in Virginia; French soldiers had been living in forts along Lake Erie for two generations. But west of the Alleghenies, not even a cabin. No Indians lived there, or even near there.

Wild grapevines tangled the treetops and shut out the sun. Few songbirds lived in the deep woods. Bright Carolina parakeets — red, green, and yellow — nested in the dark forest. There were ravens then, too. Woodpeckers rattled the big trees' trunks, ruffled grouse whirred their tail feathers in the fall, and every long once in a while a nervous gang of empty-headed turkeys came hustling and kicking through the leaves — but no one heard any of this, no one at all.

– *Annie Dillard*

Michael S. Harper

Michael S. Harper is University Professor and Professor of English at Brown University, where he has taught since 1970. He is the first Poet Laureate of the State of Rhode Island, a term he held from 1988-93. He has published ten books of poetry, two of which were nominated for the National Book Award: *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* and *Images of Kin, New and Selected Poems*, the latter won the Melville-Cane Award from the Poetry Society of America. His book *History Is Your Own Heartbeat* won the Black Academy of Arts & Letters Award for poetry in 1971. In 1990, he received the Robert Hayden Poetry Award from the United Negro College Fund. He is coeditor of *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep*, an anthology of poetry by African Americans from 1945 to the present, and in 1997, he received the first annual Claiborne Pell Award for excellence in the arts.

"Artists are here to disturb the peace." – James Baldwin

I combined my NEA Award with a Guggenheim grant so I could take the whole year off from Brown University, where I have taught since 1970; administering a program has taken its toll, but 1977 was pivotal; I had just returned from an eight-country trip in Africa to my brother's demise.

The African countries have remained in my memory: Senegal, where I was granted an audience with Senghor; Gambia, where I traveled to Juffure, the famous Mandinka town of Alex Haley's *Roots*; Ghana, where I visited Emmanuel Boye and Kofi Awoonor, who'd survived imprisonment in Cape Coast; Nigeria, where I could not locate Chinua Achebe, the novelist; Zaire, where I had an audience with Nadine Gordimer, and where I read at the U.S. Information Agency and heard her story about the sacrifice of a chief in the border area; Botswana, where I saw Wole Serote; Zambia, where I met Frank Chipasula, the poet; Kenya, where I saw Karen Blixen's vision juxtaposed to James Ngugí.

Literature, for me, has always been a study of comparative humanity, the formal and the vernacular at work in the parlance of speech and song. My service to NEA panels over the years has been in recognition of our regional integrity, our scope as a nation, its complex configurations of culture, and a waning literacy. Artists are here to disturb the peace.

Literature, for me, has always been a study of comparative humanity, the formal and the vernacular at work in the parlance of speech and song.

We Assume: On the Death of Our Son, Reuben Masai Harper

We assume
that in 28 hours,
lived in a collapsible isolette,
you learned to accept pure oxygen
as the natural sky;
the scant shallow breaths
that filled those hours
cannot, did not make you fly —
but dreams were there
like crooked palmprints on
the twin-thick windows of the nursery —
in the glands of your mother.

We assume
that sterile hands
drank chemicals in and out
from lungs opaque with mucus,
pumped your stomach,
eeked the bicarbonate in
crooked, green-winged veins,
out in a plastic mask;

A woman who'd lost her first son
consoled us with an angel gone ahead
to pray for our family —
gone into that sky
seeking oxygen,
gone into autopsy,
a fine brown powdered sugar,
a disposable cremation:

We assume
you did not know we loved you.

– *Michael S. Harper*

Susan Ludvigson

Susan Ludvigson's most recent books of poems are *Trinity* and *Helle's Story*; she has published five other collections with LSU Press, and two other chapbooks. Her *New and Selected Poems* is scheduled for publication by LSU Press in 1999. Ludvigson frequently represents the U.S. at international writing congresses, which have included the first meeting of French, Soviet, and American women writers in Paris, as well as poetry festivals in Canada, Belgium, and the former Yugoslavia. Among her fellowships are a Guggenheim and a Fulbright. She is Poet-in-Residence and Professor of English at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

It seems to me an almost religious act of faith for legislators to affirm the importance of works of the imagination, of the spirit, by giving modest support to artists. It is not an exaggeration to say that such support changed my life, my view of history, my relationship to the world. My poems are more mature by far, their richest materials often coming directly from experiences that grants made possible. This fellowship bought me time – the one resource artists rarely have in abundance, and our greatest need.

My poems are more mature by far, their richest materials often coming directly from experiences that grants made possible.

Grace

Walking behind two men, I watch
the long tail of a pheasant drift
and rise, hanging half out
of a pocket made for it, feathers
caught in the small breeze
parting, coming together
like living things. They're September
colors, could make the quills
our neighbor says he'd write with
if he wrote.

The one with the bird has his shotgun
broken, its V slung over his shoulder
an echo of geese. The other
carries his gun in his arms, is calling
the spaniel, who chases a moth
into a ditch.

Dawn again. Sun's a pink slit
between mountains. I wait
for the crack of a shot to slice
the lightening sky. But all the birds
have disappeared — even the swallows
whose spiral above the balcony
at this hour is a mournful concert,
a skittery dance.

Pines in the distance begin to brighten,
deep blue to something like green.

Everything winged must be dreaming.

– *Susan Ludvigson*

Dan O'Brien

Dan O'Brien lives and works on a ranch in South Dakota. An avid naturalist, he has written two classics on falconry: *The Rites of Autumn: A Falconer's Journey Across the American West* and *Equinox: Life, Love, and Birds of Prey.* His collection of short stories, *Eminent Domain*, received the Iowa Award for Short Fiction, and he has written the novels *Spirit of the Hills*, *In the Center of the Nation*, and *Brendan Prairie.*

I was working as a part-time biologist and taking care of cows when the NEA came through. It was the first time anyone had told me that my writing might be of some value. I still do a little biology and take care of a few cows, but my tax return says "writer." If it weren't for the NEA grant that would not be the case.

I still do a little biology and take care of a few cows, but my tax return says "writer."

from

In the Center of the Nation

Coming from either direction the land changes before you have a chance to get ready for it. Traveling eastward, you see the grasslands for the first time from several thousand feet up in the Rocky Mountains. You come around a turn intent on the ruggedness of the mountains, and suddenly the pine trees, rocks, and fast-running water are gone. Below you, though still fifty miles off, is the flattest, smoothest, most treeless stretch of land imaginable. And if you're traveling west, you've just gotten used to the fertile, black soils of Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa, just come to expect the neatly planted, prosperous farm buildings surrounded by cultivated groves of trees, when you come to the Missouri River, and it all goes to hell. Suddenly the order is gone, the prosperity scattered. When you get the feeling that the whole world can see you but no one is watching, you have come to the grasslands of North America.

They roll up out of the Missouri River breaks and flatten, with few deviations, for six hundred miles. Since the beginning the grasslands have reminded Europeans of an ocean, an ocean of grass. But, of course, they were as far from the big water as they would get. Maybe knowing that, but still having the feeling that they're floating, unable to reach anything familiar and solid, tends to drive people crazy. And maybe it's that craziness that makes some people move the way they do when they come to the grasslands: from one river drainage to the next, from town to town, right through the grasslands. Get away, fast.

Things have always moved out here, but usually in a circle. Like the geese, the ducks, the Indians, the buffalo. My God, the buffalo! Millions, weighing a ton apiece, turning grass into meat and moving on. Not moving through like the ocean people, but moving in huge, annual circles and coming back to the place where they have always been. Moving along the Missouri when they felt like it, turning to the west and grazing along the Cheyenne River, staying on the benches to the south, eating the wheatgrass, the bluestem, the switchgrass, and fescue.

For ten million years they moved like that, until Europeans came and said that all of it had to belong to someone. The buffalo were killed. For trespassing? Who knows? Only the birds, those that survive, still move in grand swirling migrations that take them thousands of miles south in winter and thousands of miles north in summer. They move back and forth with the seasons, perpendicular to the path of the people on the interstate highway.

– *Dan O'Brien*

Charles Wright

Charles Wright was born in Hardin County, Tennessee and grew up there and in North Carolina. He is a poet of extraordinary range and productivity, publishing collections of his work since 1963. He is the author of *The Voyage, The Dream Animal, Backwater, Dead Color, The Southern Cross, Zone Journals* and *The World of Ten Thousand Things*. Born in Tennessee, he has taught at a number of American universities; for the past 14 years, he has been Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, the PEN Translation Prize for his work on Italian poet Eugenio Montale, the National Book Award, and the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize.

The NEA grant was of enormous help to me. It enabled me to spend time in two places, Montana and California, which played a large part in a long poem I was undertaking and which went on into November of 1984. The poem, "A Journal of True Confessions," 11 pages long, took me almost five months to complete. It was published in *The Paris Review*. I was also able to produce two shorter pieces, "March Journal" and "Night Journal," both of which appeared in Field magazine, and "Yard Journal" which appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Still, the primary importance of the grant to me, and the primary result of the grant in writing terms, is the long, five-month piece I mentioned. Without the grant, I would have been unable to go to the two locations and spend time there that resulted in such, I like to think, good results. The poem is the centerpiece of the first part of the book, a group of 'verse journals.' I am greatly indebted to the Literature Program and the National Endowment for the Arts for the freed time and resources it gave me to get this particular work done.

[The grant] enabled me to spend time in two places, Montana and California, which played a large part in a long poem I was undertaking...

Driving Through Tennessee

It's strange what the past brings back.
Our parents, for instance, how ardently they still loom
In the brief and flushed
Fleshtones of memory, one foot in front of the next
Even in retrospect, and so unimpeachable.

And towns that we lived in once,
And who we were then, the roads we went back and forth on
Returning ahead of us like rime
In the moonlight's fall, and Jesus returning, and Stephen Martyr
And St. Paul of the Sword . .

— I am their music,
Mothers and fathers and places we hurried through in the night:
I put my mouth to the dust and sing their song.
Remember us, Galeoto, and whistle our tune, when the time comes,
For charity's sake.

– *Charles Wright*

Sandra Cisneros

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago and now lives and writes in San Antonio, Texas. She has worked as a teacher to high school dropouts, a poet-in-the-schools, a college recruiter, an arts administrator, and as a visiting writer at a number of universities. She received a fellowship from the Lannan Foundation in 1991. Among her books are a collection of poetry entitled *My Wicked Wicked Ways*, the novel *The House on Mango Street*, and a collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek*.

To call yourself a writer takes a great deal of audacity when you don't earn your living writing, when you don't have a trust fund, health insurance, a car, a house, a book, and are overcome with despair with your wretched life, still sleeping on the floor, books stored in milk crates, and your employment record is wobbly because you keep quitting jobs when they don't leave you time to write.

The NEA Fellowship I received for poetry in 1982 arrived when I was feeling most vulnerable, most close to giving up.

I quit my job, paid off my student loans, wrapped up my community volunteer work, and wrote full-time for a year and a half. During this period I finished my novel, *The House on Mango Street*, and most of my next book of poetry. if the NEA had not arrived, I would still be writing *Mango Street*.

Another NEA in 1987, this time for fiction, arrived as if Divine Providence knew I was dangling from a thread. A severe depression in my 32nd year almost did me in. The fellowship saved my life – saved me from myself, from the self-destruction of despair and verified I was indeed valuable, what I did mattered, not just to myself and to a few friends, but to strangers who had judged my work extraordinary and, therefore, deemed my life important. That year, that validation meant more to me than the money.

As a small press writer, as a woman and a woman of Mexican descent, my fellowships helped to serve as validation that I was in fact a genuine writer, not some dilettante pretending to be. I could not call myself writer now if it weren't for the timely assistance of the National Endowment for the Arts.

As a small press writer, as a woman and a woman of Mexican descent, my fellowships helped to serve as validation that I was in fact a genuine writer…

My Lucy Friend Who Smells Like Corn

Lucy Anguiano, Texas girl who smells like corn, like Frito Bandito chips, like tortillas, something like that warm smell of *nixtamal* or bread the way her head smells when she's leaning close to you over a paper cutout doll or on the porch when we are squatting over marbles trading this pretty crystal that leaves a blue star on your hand for that giant cat-eye with a grasshopper green spiral in the center like the juice of bugs on the windshield when you drive to the border, like the yellow blood of butterflies.

Have you ever eated dog food? I have. After crunching like ice, she opens her big mouth to prove it, only a pink tongue rolling around in there like a blind worm, and Janey looking in because she said, Show me. But me, I like that Lucy, corn-smell hair and aqua flip-flops just like mine that we bought at the K-Mart for only seventy-nine cents same time.

I'm going to sit in the sun, don't care if it's a million trillion degrees outside, so my skin can get so dark it's blue where it bends like Lucy's. Her whole family like that. Eyes like knife slits. Lucy and her sisters. Norma, Margarita, Ofelia, Herminia, Nancy, Olivia, Cheli, y la Amber Sue.

Screen door with no screen. BANG! Little black dog biting his fur. Fat couch on the porch. Some of the windows painted blue, some pink because her daddy got tired that day or forgot. Mama in the kitchen feeding clothes into the wringer washer and clothes rolling out all stiff and twisted and flat like paper. Lucy got her arm stuck once and had to yell, Maaa! and her mama had to put the machine in reverse and then her hand rolled back, the finger black and later, her nail fell off. *But did you arm get flat like the clothes? What happened to your arm? Did they have to pump it with air?* No, only the finger, and she didn't cry neither.

Lean across the porch rail and pin the pink sock of the baby Amber Sue on top of Cheli's flowered T-shirt, and the blue jeans of la Ofelia over the inside seam of Olivia's blouse, over the flannel nightgown of Margarita so it don't stretch out, and then you take the work shirts of their daddy and hang them upside down like this, and this way all the clothes don't get so wrinkled and take up less space and you don't waste pins. The girls all wear each other's clothes, except Olivia who is stingy, because there ain't no boys here. Only girls and one father who is never home hardly and one mother who says, *Ay! I'm real tired*, and so many sisters there's no time to count them.

I'm sitting in the sun even though it's the hottest part of the day, the part that makes the streets dizzy, when the heat makes a little hat on the top of your head and bakes the dust and weed grass and sweat up so good, all steamy and smelling like sweet corn.

I want to rub heads and sleep in a bed with little sisters, some at the top and some at the feets. I think it would be fun to sleep with sisters you could yell at one at a time or all together, instead of all alone on the fold-out chair in the living room.

When I get home Abuelita will say, *Didn't I tell you?* and I'll get it because I was supposed to wear this dress again tomorrow. But first I'm going to jump off an old pissy mattress in the Anguiano yard. I'm going to scratch your mosquito bites, Lucy, so they'll itch you, then put Mercurochrome smiley faces on them. We're going to trade shoes and wear them on our hands. We're going to walk over to Janey Ortiz's house and say, *We're never going to be your friend again forever!* We're going to run home backwards and we're going to run home frontwards, look twice under the house where the rats hide and I'll stick one foot in there because you dared me, sky so blue and heaven inside those white clouds. I'm going to peel a scab from my knee and eat it, sneeze on the cat, give you three M&M's I've been saving for you since yesterday, comb your hair with my fingers and braid it into teeny-tiny braids real pretty. We're going to wave to a lady we don't know on the bus. Hello! I'm going to somersault on the rail of the front porch even though my *chones* show. And cut paper dolls we draw ourselves, and color in their clothes with crayons, my arm around your neck.

And when we look at each other, our arms gummy from an orange Popsicle we split, we could be sisters, right? We could be, you and me waiting for our teeths to fall and money. You laughing something into my ear that tickles, and me going, Ha Ha Ha Ha. Her and me, my Lucy friend who smells like corn.

– *Sandra Cisneros*

Mark Strand

Mark Strand was born in Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Canada. His collections of poems include: *Dark Harbor, The Continuous Life, Selected Poems, The Late Hour, The Story of our Lives, Reasons For Moving*, and *Sleeping With One Eye Open.* He has also published a book of prose, entitled *The Monument* and has written books on artists William Bailey and Hopper. His translations include two volumes of the poems of Carlos Drummond de Andrade. He has also published three books for children.

Strand has been the recipient of Fellowships from the Ingram Merrill, Rockefeller, and Guggenheim Foundations. He has been awarded the Fellowship of the Academy of American Poets, a John D. And Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Award, the Bollingen Prize, and has served as Poet Laureate of the United States. He is currently the Elliott Coleman Professor of Poetry in the Writing Seminars at the Johns Hopkins University. For many years, he wrote and taught at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

The NEA was valuable in relieving me of tedious and time-consuming obligations of journalism. I was able to concentrate my literary efforts to what I was best at – namely, poetry. I shall always be grateful to the National Endowment for the Arts for the generosity in giving me the grant.

The NEA [grant allowed me to] to concentrate my literary efforts to what I was best at – namely, poetry.

Life in the Valley

Like many brilliant notions — easy to understand
But hard to believe — the one about our hating it here
Was put aside and then forgot. Those freakish winds
Over the flaming lake, bearing down, bringing a bright
Electrical dust, an ashen air crowded with leaves —
Fallen, ghostly — shading the valley, filling it with
A rushing sound, were not enough to drive us out.
Nor were those times the faded winter sun
Lowered a frozen half-light over the canyons
And silent storms buried the high resorts
With heavy snows. We simply stayed indoors.
Our friends would say the views — starlight over
The clustered domes and towers, the frigid moon
In the water's glass — were great. And we agreed,
And got to like the sight of iron horses rusting
In the fields, and birds with wings outspread,
Their silver bones glowing at the water's edge,
And far away, huge banks of clouds motionless as lead.

– *Mark Strand*

Louise Glück

Louise Glück is an award-winning poet. In 1985, she received the National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Triumph of Achilles*, and in 1993, she received the Pulitzer Prize for *The Wild Iris*. Among her other titles are *Firstborn, Descending Figure*, and *Proofs and Theories*. She is the recipient of a Rockefeller grant and two Guggenheim fellowships, and currently teaches at Williams College and lives in Vermont.

Like most writers, I do other work. During the period of my most recent fellowship, I was teaching at Williams College. In many ways, I love that work: I cannot always be certain when my own writing will be going well and, since I live in a rural area, have found it helpful – often – to be in greater proximity to human sound, to have objective tasks. But Williams is far from northern Vermont: six hours by Vermont Transit. Increasingly, the rhythm of my teaching life (which divides the week – three nights away, four at home) has been a strain. By the time of my last fellowship, it had become quite a desperate strain; because I do not teach full time, I was not eligible for sabbaticals.

The great gift of that fellowship was the relief of pressure; that the year itself was not one of my most productive seems hardly an issue. I finished a book (*Ararat*). But I am convinced that subsequent work owes much to that time, to the sense of possible liberation, or, at least, respite from an exhausting regimen.

I am convinced that subsequent work owes much to that time, to the… respite from an exhausting regimen.

Vespers

Once I believed in you; I planted a fig tree
Here, in Vermont, country
of no summer. It was a test: if the tree lived
it would mean you existed.

By this logic, you do not exist. Or you exist
exclusively in warmer climates,
in fervent Sicily and Mexico and California,
where are grown the unimaginable
apricot and fragile peach. Perhaps
they see your face in Sicily; here, we barely see
the hem of your garment. I have to discipline myself
to share with John and Noah the tomato crop.

If there is justice in some other world, those
like myself, whom nature forces
into lives of abstinence, should get
the lion's share of all things, all
objects of hunger, greed being
praise of you. And no one praises
more intensely than I, with more
painfully checked desire, or more deserves
to sit at your right hand, if it exists, partaking
of the perishable, the immortal fig,
which does not travel.

– *Louise Glück*

Richard Bausch

Richard Bausch is a novelist and short story writer, who teaches at George Mason University in Virginia. Recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, he has written the novels *Real Presence, The Last Good Time, Mr. Field's Daughter, Violence* and *Rebel Powers*. His short stories are collected under the titles *Spirits, and Other Stories, The Fireman's Wife and Other Stories,* and *Rare and Endangered Species*. His most recent book is *Good Evening Mr. and Mrs. America, and All the Ships At Sea*, a novel.

I had the whole morning to myself, and I was supposed to spend it writing. Instead I lay on the couch and listened to Sibelius's *5th Symphony*. It was fall, and there was a big picture window in the living room of the house we lived in then. This window looked out on woods, all those fall colors, and the leaves were dropping, as if with the cadences of the music of that symphony's opening movement. I watched the performance a while, then got up and went out of the house, to an amusement/ game store and spent about six dollars playing Pac Man, feeling sick at heart, the way avoidance of work always makes me feel. I drove home with the sense of having wasted the morning, and in the mail was this large white envelope, telling me the good news. It was like a prod from on high, like notice from the universe that I was expected to get back to work. I wrote most of *The Last Good Time* and several of the stories of *Spirits, And Other Stories* under its auspices.

When I realized what it was, I drove over to the university and walked up to my wife Karen's office, and handed the letter to her. This was going to make it possible for one or both of us to be home with the children; it was going to mean time for me to work. Karen stared at the letter, and smiled, and kept staring. One of my students, a friend, the late Dan Rudy, saw me crossing the campus on the way to her office. He told me later that he knew from the way I looked that something wonderful had happened.

I've since been given a Guggenheim Fellowship; The Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writer's Award; and the Award of the Academy of Arts and Letters. Nothing ever quite matched the excitement, happiness and encouragement I felt, that sunny fall day in 1982, when I learned that I'd got the NEA Fellowship.

It was like a prod from on high, like notice from the universe that I was expected to get back to work.

from

High-Heeled Shoe

Dornberg, out for a walk in the fields behind his house one morning, found a black high-heeled shoe near the path leading down to the neighboring pond. The shoe had scuffed places on its shiny surface and caked mud adhering to it, but he could tell from the feel of the soft leather that it was well made, the kind a woman who has money might wear. He held it in his hand and observed that his sense of equilibrium shifted; he caught himself thinking of misfortune, failure, scandal.

The field around him was peaceful, rife with fragrances of spring. The morning sun was warm, the air dry, the sky blue. Intermittently, drowsily, the cawing of crows sounded somewhere in the distance, above the languid murmur of little breezes in the trees bordering on the far side of the pond. A beautiful, innocent morning, and here he stood, holding the shoe close to his chest in the defensive, wary posture of the guilty — the attitude of someone caught with the goods — nervously scraping the dried mud from the shoe's scalloped sides.

The mud turned to dust and made a small red cloud about his head, and when the wind blew, the glitter of dust swept over him. He used his shirttail to wipe his face, then walked a few paces, automatically looking for the shoe's mate. He thought he saw something in the tall grass at the edge of the pond, but when he got to it, stepping in the mud and catching himself on thorns to make his way, he found the dark, broken curve of a beer bottle. The owner of the pond had moved last fall to Alaska, and there were signs posted all over about the penalties for trespassing, but no one paid any attention to them. Casual littering went on. It was distressing. Dornberg bent down and picked up the shard of glass. Then he put his hand inside the shoe and stretched the leather, holding it up in the brightness.

He felt weirdly dislodged from himself.

Beyond the pond and its row of trees, four new houses were being built. Often the construction crews, made up mostly of young men, came to the pond to eat their box lunches and, sometimes, to fish. On several occasions they remained at the site long after the sun went down; the lights in the most nearly finished house burned; other cars pulled in, little rumbling sports cars and shiny sedans, motorcycles, even a taxi now and again. There were parties that went on into the early morning hours. Dornberg had heard music, voices, the laughter of women, all of which depressed him, as though this jazzy, uncomplicated gaiety — the kind that had no cost and generated no guilt — had chosen these others over him. The first time he heard it, he was standing at the side of his house, near midnight, having decided to haul the day's garbage out before going to bed (how his life had lately turned upon fugitive urges to cleanse and purge and make order!). The music stopped him in the middle of his vaguely palliative task, and he listened, wondering, thinking his senses were deceiving him: a party out in the dark, as if the sound of it were drifting down out of the stars.

Some nights when sleep wouldn't come, he had stared out his window at the faint shadows of the unfinished houses and, finding the one house with all its windows lighted, had quietly made his way downstairs to the back door and stood in the chilly open frame, listening for the music, those pretty female voices — the tumult of the reckless, happy young.

– *Richard Bausch*

Colleen McElroy

Colleen J. McElroy lives in Seattle, where she is on the faculty of the Department of English at the University of Washington. She has published a number of collections of poetry and short stories, and writes for stage and television. Her most recent publications are *A Long Way from St. Louis, Driving Under the Cardboard Pines* (fiction), and *What Madness Brought Me Here: New and Selected Poems, 1968-88*. A new collection of poems, *Travelling Music*, is forthcoming in 1998. Winner of the Before Columbus American Book Award, she also has received two Fulbright Fellowships, a DuPont Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Fellowship. Her work has been translated into Russian, Italian, German, Malay, and Serbo-Croatian.

While Goethe whispered, "Light, more light!" as his last words, most writers despair from wanting: Time, more time! We borrow it from our families, from ourselves (at the expense of our health), from jobs that provide us with meager amounts of time. We long for that reprieve that will allow us days of time to write, to create, to devote ourselves to the artistic imagination. As a writer, the NEA Fellowship allowed me those blessed hours, time to explore the realms of the imagination, to allow writing to be that healthy job that I need to sustain myself as an artist. It was that rare period of time when I could let writing and literature consume entire days, and I think, grow in my craft in ways that I cannot when my time is divided. It gave me the luxury of being a full-time writer, and of finishing books that time, that elusive element, kept at arm's length.

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The Lover Romanced by Rain

. . . oh, the bread of colleens butters the rain
— D. Boucicault, "The Brides of Garryowen"

you and me
and a warm rain falling
Seattle rain
and my hair wrapped
in a tight scarf
the light falling
like polka dots
of green shadows
the pale scents of summer
dancing in a backdrop of trees
while each moment falls
into patterns of yesterdays

windowpanes of rain
and you covering the landscape
from here to the peninsula

today I am home alone
the rain has turned hard
and cruel as your laughter
the house is soaked and steamy
it smells dank and moldy
mud worries the doorway
milk turns sour with mildew
I found a moss-covered picture of you
curled like a dead spider
in the corner on a dark shelf
and the rain
singing like a sleeping pill

at night the rain is lonely
and calls me friend
I cannot remember what you called me

it has been raining for three months
rain falling without clouds
covering Elliott Bay in pale silver light
falling through a sudden haze of sun
and I hear the devil's wife
her moans synchronized to the beat
while blood showers of red rain
wash away footprints of dead souls
and cloak the night with singing stones

I no longer try to remember your eyes
I keep my room in the rainfall
of morning and open my arms
to the pulse of water
let tiny trickles wriggle like wet
fingers past my black belly and down
into the shallow cup of thighs
where I drown singing

it is always raining somewhere
whenever I dream of you
your face dissolves in rain

– *Colleen McElroy*

Denise Giardina

Denise Giardina grew up in a coal camp in McDowell County, West Virginia. She received a B.A. in history from West Virginia Wesleyan College and an M.Div. from Virginia Theological Seminary (Episcopal) in Alexandria, Virginia. Giardina has published three novels, *Good King Harry*, *Storming Heaven*, and *Unquiet Earth*. Her fourth novel, *Saints and Villains*, is scheduled for publication in early 1998. *Storming Heaven* was a Discovery selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club, a New Voices selection of the Quality Paperback Award for new writers, and received the 1987 W. D. Weatherford Award for the best published work about the Appalachian South. *The Unquiet Earth* received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and the Lillian Smith Award for fiction. Ms. Giardina has written op-ed pieces for the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and wrote about her experiences in the Pittston coal strike of 1989-90 for *The Nation*, *Southern Exposure* and the *Village Voice*. She was the writer-in-residence at Hollins College in 1991, and at various times, she has been a teacher, community organizer, activist, hospital clerk, and is a former Episcopal deacon. She now lives in Charleston and teaches at West Virginia State College.

I have been pleased to be a recipient of an NEA fellowship for creative writing on two separate occasions. Both fellowships came at fortuitous times and allowed me to take time off from other employment to finish my third and fourth novels. I have been especially grateful for my most recent fellowship. I have recently completed a novel, *Saints and Villains*, to be published by W.W. Norton in 1998. For four years I struggled to research and write this novel about German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer and to teach at my local college at the same time. Any novelist will tell you that without sustained and uninterrupted time to think and write, the task of finishing a book is much more difficult. Thanks to the NEA, I was able to take half a year off without pay. Added to my usual summer break, I was able to finish half of my manuscript in nine months. There is no question that without the NEA's help, my novel would still be far from completion.

Thanks to the NEA, I was able to… finish half of my manuscript in nine months.

from

Storming Heaven

Earliest thing I recall from when I was a boy is Daddy coming in from the mines and taking his bath. It always scared me when he came in. It would be way after dark, and I'd be asleep with Talcott and Kerwin in the bed in the front room. Most nights he'd come in quiet, just lay himself down, coal dust and all, on a mat behind the cookstove in the kitchen, so as not to track dirt into the rest of the house. He would be back out before dawn anyway, so there was no need to bathe. But on Saturday, Mommy boiled water, rattled coal in the buckets to throw on the fire, pulled out the Number Three wash tub. I could never sleep through the noise. I always lay on the side of the bed next to the door, so I could hang my head over the edge and watch her. Daddy would stomp onto the back porch, peel off his boots, and bang them against the steps to knock off the crusts of mud and coal dust. He stripped off his clothes and left them in a heap for Mommy to wash the next day. She never washed his mine clothes with the rest of our things. Then Daddy came inside. His face and hands were black and shiny; the rest of him was pale and waxy like lard. The whites of his eyes were vivid. He tossed his pay envelope on the kitchen table.

"Snake again," was all he would say, meaning he hadn't been able to mine enough coal to pay off the bills at the company store, that he still owed for food and doctoring and his work tools and blasting powder, that his paycheck had a single wavy line where the money figures should have been. But I learned about those things later. At that age, I thought he meant he had seen a copperhead, and that was why his eyes looked so wild and frightful. I lived in terror of snakes.

Daddy sank slowly into the round tub of hot water, moaning as he went down. The tub was just large enough for him to sit in if he drew up his knees under his chin. The edge of the tub scraped his backbone just above his fleshless buttocks. Mommy stood over him pouring water from her pots and kettles. She scrubbed his face like he was one of us babies but never got all the coal dust off. His face was gray on Sundays like a newspaper photograph.

– *Denise Giardina*

Jane Hamilton

Jane Hamilton lives, works, and writes in an orchard farmhouse in Wisconsin. Her short stories have appeared in *Harper's* magazine, and her first book, *The Book of Ruth*, was awarded the 1989 PEN/Hemingway Foundation Award for best first novel. *The Book of Ruth* was chosen for the Oprah Winfrey book club in 1996. Her second novel, *A Map of the World*, was a best seller.

The NEA fellowship came at a point when I desperately needed space and quiet and time. The fellowship made the writer's life possible and so saved my life. This sounds dramatic, I suppose, but in truth the fellowship gave me nothing less than possibility and hope. With the funds, I bought space and quiet and time, essential as air for a writer and so difficult to come by in the work-a-day world.

With the funds, I bought space and quiet and time, essential as air for a writer and so difficult to come by in the work-a-day world.

from

A Map of the World

I have thought a fair amount about our farm, about our house that was built in 1852. It was still a good house, even though it didn't look like much. There are thousands of those houses across the Midwest. White clapboard houses with old windmills in their yards, many of them standing empty now on the prairies of Kansas and Nebraska. They are a series of squares, built according to need. Ours are deceptively strong houses, stronger than the winds of a twister, determined against insects and drought and long winters, determined against time, against all of the generations that have passed through them. I have tried to imagine the men and women who have broken their bread in our kitchen, and tilled the soil and fallen asleep at night, too tired to take their boots off, as I sometimes was. The farmer who built our house, Thomas Clausen, kissed his wife goodbye and walked off to fight in the Civil War. An old guy down at Del's told me about him. When Clausen came back from the war he turned the other way and went to California to pan for gold. I don't know if his wife and children begrudged him his absences.

Alice once told me that pioneer women suffered from anorexia, that there was evidence that proved it was so. I couldn't imagine Thomas Clausen walking up the lane from California only to find his wife skin and bones. I was used to thinking of that first family as long-suffering but philosophical, wise and robust. I found a picture up in the attic of a later family, standing out in front of the house, all of them, even the baby, looking grim as hell. I actually don't have too much rapture about time past, although Alice has accused me of being hopelessly sentimental. There has never been a time of simple light. Still, I try to imagine the land for the taking, and what it must have meant to have space for as far as the eye can see. The Wisconsin Indians in 10,000 B.C., perhaps sleeping right where our yard was, hunted mastodon. *Mastodon.* They ate bison, giant beavers, caribou, and elk. It is unthinkable now that anyone could ever have drunk out of our rivers and lakes. I don't have the power to imagine what it must have been like. I can't even visualize the endless prairie, the vast tracks of woodland. I can't hold in my mind long enough to know absolutely what we've lost. And so the loss is magnified, knowing, as I do, that my powers are poor, and that our world has become diminished beyond all measure.

I have thought about the boy who lived on our farm, Gurdon Huck, who in 1908 fell off a hay wagon and broke his neck. I found his father's log of weather and planting and harvesting, on the floor of our closet. It was under a hatbox like a piece of trash. His last entry says, "June 9, 1908. Yesterday our boy fell off the wagon. Broke his neck. Dead." I showed the notebook to Dan, but I wasn't willing to give it up to the Dairy Shrine. It belongs to the house. In the attic, in an old trunk, we found books on agriculture and etiquette and religion, a fountain pen, a bag of lace, a cracked platter, a pie tin filled with black-and-gray stones. We had no idea who gathered the stones or where. We brought them downstairs and set them in the middle of our kitchen table. They were smooth as could be. As the weeks went on they gathered dust and crumbs and jelly spots. They came to look less and less like relics from the ages and more and more like us. I cleaned them up and put them back in the attic.

The people who lived in our house probably considered, as most of us do, that our moment is what is real. It wasn't too long after we moved to the farm that for me time began to run together. That way of seeing probably comes with age. The past seemed to flow into the present, in some instances taking over the here and now. It was all the traces that made me feel the quickness of passing time, of passing generations. Alice wondered what we should do with the old things, the laces, the stones, the pens, the books. For her it was a matter of deciding between Goodwill and the monthly trash pickup. "They'll stay in the attic," I said. I tried to tell her that that pile of stuff served as a reminder that we are passersby, nothing more. Yet I also believed that those few things in the chest, all of the associations long ago, the layers of wallpaper in our bedroom, the journal in the closet — all of that experience matters. Alice reiterated that I was an incurable romantic. I could only say again that the past, the details of the past, in some terrible and impossible ways, matters. I say impossible because what seems important today is probably not tomorrow, and in any case most everything is lost and forgotten, or else destroyed. I stubbornly believed, in the six years we lived on the farm, that the people before us in our house left their history to us, knowing that we would safeguard it.

– Jane Hamilton

Gretel Ehrlich

Gretel Ehrlich was born in Santa Barbara, California and educated at Bennington College and UCLA Film School. She moved to Wyoming in 1976 where she lived and worked on sheep and cattle ranches for 17 years. Her books include *Geode, Rock Body*, poems, *To Touch the Water*, poems, *The Solace of Open Spaces*, essays, *Drinking Dry Clouds*, short stories, *Heart Mountain*, novel, *Islands, The Universe, Home*, essays, *Arctic Heart*, poems, *A Match to the Heart*, memoir, *Yellowstone, Land of Fire and Ice*, *Questions of Heaven*, travel memoir. She is at work on a book of nonfiction and a volume of stories, both for Pantheon. In 1987, she was the recipient of a Whiting Foundation Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1988. The American Academy of Arts and Letters honored her with the Harold B. Vurcell Award for distinguished prose in 1986. She now divides her time between the central coast of California and Wyoming.

I applied for an NEA fellowship in 1979 or maybe it was 1980, after having gone through the third worst winter in the history of Wyoming alone, in a one-room log cabin, with very little firewood, no down parka, and not much to eat. My husband-to-be had died of cancer, I'd put in four months at a Buddhist monastery, returned to Wyoming, and took up cowboying to pay for rent. Everything has, contained within it, the seeds of a teaching situation: having lost everything, I felt there was nothing more to lose. What better time to see if I had what it took to be a writer.

The NEA fellowship gave me that delicious jumpstart. Between cowboying duties, I had time to reread the entire canon of Asian and western literature, Wyoming history, and current thinking in physics, botany, and ecology. Mornings, I read Wallace Stevens, Virgil's "Eclogues," Robert Lowell, Octavio Paz, John Berryman, Li Po, Basho, Dogen, and Ikkyu; afternoons, I reread *Absalom, Absalom!*, *Portrait of a Lady*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Anna Karenin*, Kafka's *Parables*, *The Plague*, *A Farewell to Arms*, etc., and in the evenings I read *The History of Wyoming* by Larson, Emerson, Thoreau, Edward Hoagland, Annie Dillard, Lewis and Clark, and all the wonderful western diaries and expedition notes from the University of Nebraska Press. Finally, I began writing. The resulting book was *The Solace of Open Spaces*, published by Viking Penguin in 1984.

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from

Looking for a Lost Dog

I walk and walk. Past the falls, through a pass, toward a larger, rowdier creek. The sky goes black. In the distance snow on the Owl Creek Mountains glares. A blue ocean seems to stretch between, and the black sky hangs over like a frown. A string of cottonwoods whose new, tender leaves are the color of limes pulls me downstream. I come into the meadow with the abandoned apple orchard. The trees have leaves but have lost most of their blossoms. I feel as if I had caught strangers undressed.

The sun comes back, and the wind. It brings no dog, but ducks slide overhead. An Eskimo from Barrow, Alaska, told me the reason spring has such fierce winds is so birds coming north will have something to fly on.

To find what's lost; to lose what's found. Several times I've thought I might be "losing my mind." Of course, minds aren't literally misplaced — on the contrary, we live too much under them. As with viewing the falls, we can lose sight of what is too close. It is between the distant and close-up views that the struggle between impulse and reason, logic and passion takes place.

The feet move; the mind wanders. In his journals Thoreau wrote: "The saunterer, in the good sense, is no more vagrant than the meandering river, which is all the while sedulously seeking the shortest course to the sea."

Today I'm filled with longing — for what I'm not, for what is impossible, for people I love who can't be in my life. Passions of all sorts struggle soundlessly, or else, like the falls, they are all noise but can't be seen. My hybrid anguish spends itself as recklessly and purposefully as water.

Now I'm following a game trail up a sidehill. It's a mosaic of tracks — elk, bear, rabbit, and bird. If city dwellers could leave imprints in the cement, it would look this way: tracks would overlap, go backward and forward like the peregrine saunterings of the mind.

I see a dog's track, or is it a coyote's? I get down on my hands and knees to sniff out a scent. What am I doing? I entertain expectations of myself as preposterous as when I landed in Tokyo — I felt so at home there that I thought I would break into fluent Japanese. Now I sniff the ground and smell only dirt. If I spent ten years sniffing, would I learn scents?

The tracks veer off the trail and disappear. Descending into a dry wash whose elegant, tortured junipers and tumbled boulders resemble a Japanese garden, I trip on a sagebrush root. I look. Deep in the center of the plant is a bird's nest, but instead of eggs, a locust stares up at me.

Some days I think this one place isn't enough. That's when nothing is enough, when I want to live multiple lives and be allowed to love without limits. Those days, like today, I walk with a purpose but no destinations. Only then do I see, at least momentarily, that everything is here. To my left a towering cottonwood is lunatic with birdsong. Under it I'm a listening post while its great gray trunk — like a baton or the source of something — heaves its green symphony into the air.

I walk and walk: from the falls, over Grouse Hill, to the dry wash. Today it is enough to make a shadow.

– *Gretel Ehrlich*

AFTERWORD

WRITING AMERICA demonstrates the vitality of the American story. Literature is a national art. Work written in Ohio is published in Oregon and read throughout the country and around the world. Books tell the stories of our lives and help us to understand each other. Through them we can appreciate our differences and celebrate our commonalities. At the end of the century and at the beginning of the millennium, American books record and reflect what it means to be an American alive today.

After thirty years, the record of the Creative Writing Fellowships shows unparalleled support for writers at critical, early stages of their careers. Since 1967, the American people have invested $33.7 million on American writers. The dividends are the thousands of novels, short story collections, essays and poems that give voice to the American experience and deepen our culture, adding a note of grace in our lives.

Many of the most acclaimed books of contemporary American literature have been written on Endowment fellowships, as this volume demonstrates. Since 1990, 27 of the 33 recipients of poetry and fiction awards through the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award have been previous Arts Endowment fellowship winners.

This record becomes even more astounding when one realizes that since 1984 fellowships have been awarded on the basis of anonymous manuscript review; panelists do not know the identity of the writers, their publishing histories,

academic achievements or previous awards. Grants are made on the basis of artistic excellence alone. The process of manuscript review lasts seven months, undertaken by an annually changing panel of distinguished writers, editors, and readers. Each year between two and five percent of eligible applicants receive grants.

From the beginning, literary fellowships were designed to differ from other national awards by encouraging new work and allowing emerging writers time to write. When they receive the award, most grantees are virtually unknown. Only a handful of Americans can make a living from writing; most writers hold full-time jobs, and write when they can. Arts Endowment fellowships bring national recognition from a writer's peers and afford grantees the chance for a short time away from their daily jobs to concentrate on their art. WRITINGAMERICA, with a single contribution from each of the United States, exemplifies the many chapters of the American story at this time, and in this place. I hope you have found, as I did, that you too are in this book.

– Gigi Bradford
Literature Director
1991-1997

To find out more about Creative Writing Fellowships, visit our web site at http://arts.endow.gov or contact our Office of Public Information for the latest application guidelines.

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Published by
Office of Communications
Cherie Simon, Director

Designed by
Cox & Associates, Inc.
Silver Spring, MD

Edited by
Keith Donohue
Publications Director

With special thanks to
Gigi Bradford and Cliff Becker

This book was printed using
private donated funds.

National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20506-0001
202/682-5400
http://arts.endow.gov